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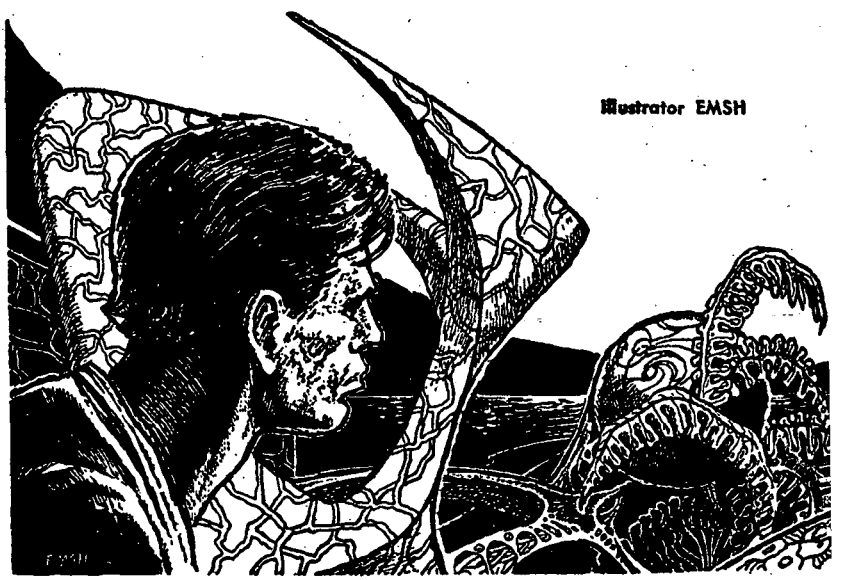
the Singing Statues

By J. G. BALLARD

The Singing statues carried a message of love to Lunora Goalen. For one man, the question was: from whom does the message come?

AGAIN last night, as the dusk air began to move across the desert from Lagoon West, I heard fragments of music coming in on the thermal rollers, remote and fleeting, echoes of the



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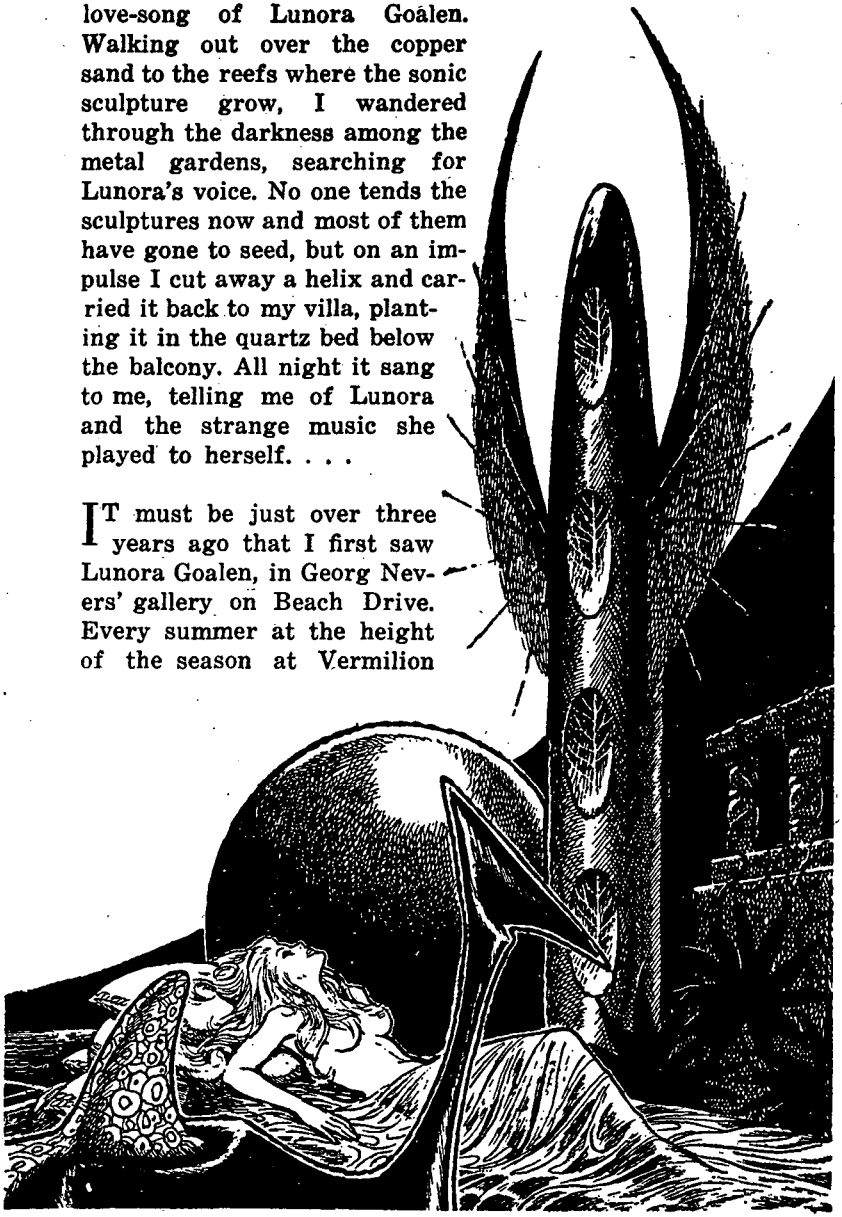
love-song of Lunora Goâlen. Walking out over the copper sand to the reefs where the sonic sculpture grow, I wandered through the darkness among the metal gardens, searching for Lunora's voice. No one tends the sculptures now and most of them have gone to seed, but on an impulse I cut away a helix and carried it back to my villa, planting it in the quartz bed below the balcony. All night it sang to me, telling me of Lunora and the strange music she played to herself. . . .

IT must be just over three years ago that I first saw Lunora Goalen, in Georg Nevers' gallery on Beach Drive. Every summer at the height of the season at Vermilion



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Sands, Georg staged a special exhibition of sonic sculpture for the tourists. Shortly after we opened one morning I was sitting inside my large statue, *Zero Orbit*, plugging in the stereo amplifiers, when Georg suddenly gasped into the skin mike and a boom like a thunderclap nearly deafened me.

Head ringing like a gong, I climbed out of the sculpture, ready to crown Georg with a nearby maquette. Putting an elegant fingertip to his lips, he gave me that look which between artist and dealer signals one thing: *Rich client.*

The sculptures in the gallery entrance had begun to hum as someone came in, but the sunlight reflected off the bonnet of a white Rolls-Royce outside obscured the doorway.

Then I saw her, hovering over the stand of art journals, followed by her secretary, a tall purse-mouthed Frenchwoman almost as famous from the newsmagazines as her mistress.

Lunora Goalen, I thought, can *all* our dreams come true? She wore an ice-cool sliver of blue silk that shimmered as she moved towards the first statue, a toque hat of black violets and bulky dark glasses that hid her face and were a nightmare to cameramen. While she paused by the statue, one of Arch Penko's frenetic tangles that looked like a rimless bicycle wheel, listening to its arms vibrate and howl, Nevers and I involuntarily steadied ourselves against the wing-piece of my sculpture.

IN general it's probably true that the most maligned species on Earth is the wealthy patron of modern art. Laughed at by the public, exploited by dealers, even the artists regard them simply as meal tickets. Lunora Goalen's superb collection of sonic sculpture on the roof of her Venice palazzo, and the million dollars' worth of generous purchases spread around her apartments in Paris, London and New York, represented freedom and life to a score of sculptors, but few felt any gratitude toward Miss Goalen.

Nevers was hesitating, apparently suffering from a sudden intention tremor, so I nudged his elbow.

"Come on," I snarled softly. "This is the apocalypse. Let's go."

Nevers turned on me icily, noticing, apparently for the first time, my rust-stained slacks and three-day stubble.

"Milton!" he snapped. "For God's sake, vanish! Sneak out through the freight exit." He jerked his head at my sculpture. "And switch that insane thing off! How did I ever let it in here?"

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LUNORA'S secretary, Mme. Charcot, spotted us at the rear of the gallery. Georg shot out four inches of immaculate cuff and swayed forward, the smile on his face as wide as a bulldozer. I backed away behind my sculpture, with no intention of leaving and letting Nevers cut my price just for the cachet of making a sale to Lunora Goalen.

Georg was bowing all over the gallery, oblivious of Mme. Charcot's contemptuous sneer. He led Lunora over to one of the exhibits and fumbled with the control panel, selecting the alto lift which would resonate most flatteringly with her own body tones. Unfortunately the statue was Sigismund Lubitsch's *Big End,* a squat bull-necked drum like an enormous toad that at its sweetest emitted a rasping grunt. An old-style railroad tycoon might have elicited a sympathetic chord from it, but its response to Lunora was like a bull's to a butterfly.

They moved on to another sculpture, and Mme. Charcot gestured to the white-gloved chauffeur standing by the Rolls. He climbed in and moved the car down the street, taking with it the beach crowds beginning to gather outside the gallery. Able now to see Lunora clearly against the hard white walls, I stepped into *Orbit* and watched her closely through the helixes.

Of course I already knew everything about Lunora Goalen. A thousand magazine exposés had catalogued ad nauseam her strange flawed beauty, her fits of melancholy and compulsive roving around the world's capitals. Like Garbo's in the '40s and '50s, her exquisite haunted profile flitted elusively through the gossip columns and society pages, in unending flight from self-imposed exile. No one felt less sorry for her than me.

Her face was the clue. As she took off her sunglasses I could see the curious shadow that fell across it, numbing the smooth white skin. There was a dead glaze in her slate-blue eyes, an uneasy tension around the mouth. Altogether I had a vague impression of something unhealthy, of a Venus with a secret vice.

Nevers was switching on sculpture right and left like a lunatic magician, and the noise was a babel of competing sensocells, some of the statues responding to Lunora's enigmatic presence, others to Nevers and the secretary.

LUNORA shook her head slowly, mouth hardening as the noise irritated her. "Yes, Mr. Nevers," she said in her slightly husky voice, "it's all very clever, but a bit of a headache. I *live* with my sculpture, I want some-

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thing intimate and personal."

"Of course, Miss Goalen," Nevers agreed hurriedly, looking around desperately. As he knew only too well, sonic sculpture was now nearing the apogee of its abstract phase, 12-tone blips and zooms were all that most statues emitted. No purely representational sound, responding to Lunora, for example, with a Mozart rondo or (better) a Webern quartet, had been built for ten years. I guessed that her early purchases were wearing out and that she was hunting the cheaper galleries in tourist haunts like Vermilion Sands in the hope of finding something designed for middle-brow consumption.

Lunora looked up pensively at *Zero Orbit*, towering at the rear of the gallery next to Nevers' desk, apparently unaware that I was hiding inside it. Suddenly realizing that the possibility of selling the statue had miraculously arisen, I crouched down inside the trunk and started to breathe heavily, activating the senso-circuits.

Immediately the statue came to life. About 12 feet high, it was shaped like an enormous metal totem topped by two heraldic wings. The big body microphones in the wing-tips were powerful enough to pick up respiratory noises at a distance of twenty feet. There were four people well within focus, and the statue began to emit a series of low rhythmic pulses as beat frequencies piled up.

Seeing the statue respond to her, Lunora came forward with interest. Nevers backed away discreetly, taking Mme. Charcot with him, leaving Lunora and I together, separated by a thin metal skin and three feet of vibrating air. Fumbling for some way of widening the responses, I eased up the control slides that lifted the volume. Neurophonics has never been my strong suit—I regard myself, in an old-fashioned way, as a sculptor, not an electrician—and the statue was only equipped to play back a simple sequence of chord variations on the sonic profile in focus.

Knowing that Lunora would soon realize that the statue's repertory was too limited for her, I picked up the hand-mike used for testing the circuits and on the spur of the moment began to croon the refrain from *Creole Love Song*. Reinterpreted by the sonic cores, and then relayed through the loudspeakers, the lulling rise and fall was pleasantly soothing, the electronic overtones disguising my voice and amplifying the tremors of emotion as I screwed up my courage (the statue was priced at 500 dollars—even subtracting Nevers' 90% commission left me with enough for the bus fare home).

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STEPPING up to the statue, Lunora listened to it motionlessly, eyes wide with astonishment, apparently assuming that it was reflecting, like a mirror, its subjective impressions of herself. Rapidly running out of breath, my speeding pulse lifting the tempo, I repeated the refrain over and over again, varying the base lift to simulate a climax.

Suddenly I saw Nevers black patent shoes through the hatch. Pretending to slip his hand into the control panel, he rapped sharply on the statue and I switched off.

"Don't, please!" Lunora cried as the sounds fell away. She looked around uncertainly, Mme. Charcot stepping nearer with a curiously watchful expression, then pulled herself together.

Nevers hesitated. "Of course, Miss Goalen, it still requires tuning, you—"

"I'll take it," Lunora said. She quickly pushed on her sunglasses, then turned and hurried from the gallery, her face hidden.

Nevers watched her go. "What happened, for heaven's sake? Is Miss Goalen all right?"

Mme. Charcot took a checkbook out of her blue crocodile handbag. A sardonic smirk played over her lips, and through the helix I had a brief but penetrating glimpse into her relationship with Lunora Goalen. It was then, I think, that I realized Lunora might be something more than a bored dilettante.

Mme. Charcot glanced at her watch, a gold pea strung on her scrawny wrist. "You will have it delivered today. By 3 o'clock sharp. Now, please, the price?"

Smoothly, Nevers said: "10,000 dollars."

Choking, I pulled myself out of the statue, unable to control myself, spluttered helplessly at Nevers.

Mme. Charcot regarded me with astonishment, frowning at my filthy togs. Nevers trod savagely on my foot. "Naturally, Madamoiselle, our prices are modest, but as you can see, M. Milton is an inexperienced artist."

Mme. Charcot nodded sagely. "This is the sculptor? I am relieved. For a moment I feared that he lived in it."

WHEN she had gone Nevers closed the gallery for the day. He took off his jacket and pulled a bottle of absinthe from the desk. Sitting back in his silk waistcoat, he trembled slightly with nervous exhaustion.

"Tell me, Milton, how can you ever be sufficiently grateful to me?"

I patted him on the back. "Georg, you were brilliant! She's another Catherine the Great, you handled her like a diplomat. When you go to Paris you'll be

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a great success. Ten thousand dollars!" I did a quick jig around the statue. "That's the sort of redistribution of wealth I like to see. How about an advance on my cut?"

Nevers examined me moodily. He was already in the Rue de Rivoli, over-bidding for Leonardos with a languid flicker of a pomaded eyebrow. He glanced at the statue and shuddered. "An extraordinary woman. Completely without taste. Which reminds me, I see you rescored the memory drum. The aria from *Tosca* cued in beautifully. I didn't realize the statue contained that."

"It doesn't," I told him, sitting on the desk. "That was me. Not exactly Caruso, I admit, but then he wasn't much of a sculptor—"

"What?" Nevers leapt out of his chair. "Do you mean you were using the hand microphone? You *fool!*"

"What does it matter? She won't know." Nevers was groaning against the wall, drumming his forehead on his fist. "Relax, you'll hear nothing."

Promptly at 9-01 the next morning the telephone rang.

AS I drove the pick-up out to Lagoon West Nevers' warnings rang in my ears—". . . six international blacklists, sue me for misrepresentation . . ." He apologized effusively to Mme. Charcot, assured her that the monotonous booming the statue emitted was most certainly not its natural response. Obviously a circuit had been damaged in transit, the sculptor himself was driving out to correct it.

Taking the beach road around the lagoon, I looked across at the Goalen mansion, an abstract summer palace that reminded me of a Frank Lloyd Wright design for an experimental department store. Terraces jutted out at all angles, and here and there were huge metal sculptures, Brancusi's and Calder mobiles, revolving in the crisp desert light. Occasionally one of the sonic statues hooted mournfully like a distant hoodoo.

Mme. Charcot collected me in the vestibule, led me up a sweeping glass stairway. The walls were heavy with Dali and Picasso, but my statue had been given the place of honor at the far end of the south terrace. The size of a tennis court, without rails (or safety net), this jutted out over the lagoon against the skyline of Vermilion Sands, long low furniture grouped in a square at its center.

Dropping the tool-bag, I made a pretense of dismantling the control panel, played with the amplifier so that the statue let out a series of staccato blips. These put it into the same category as the rest of Lunora Goalen's sculpture. A dozen pieces

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stood about on the terrace, most of them early period sonic dating back to the '70s, when sculptors produced an incredible sequence of grunting, clanking, barking and twanging statues, and galleries and public squares all over the world echoed night and day with minatory booms and thuds.

"Any luck?"

I turned to see Lunora Goalen. Unheard, she had crossed the terrace, now stood with hands on hips, watching me with interest. In her black slacks and shirt, blonde hair around her shoulders, she looked more relaxed, but sunglasses still masked her face.

"Just a loose valve. Won't take me a couple of minutes." I gave her a big rugged smile and she stretched out on the chaise longue in front of the statue. Lurking by the french windows at the far end of the terrace was Mme. Charcot, eyeing us with a beady smirk. Irritated, I switched on the statue to full volume and coughed loudly into the hand-mike.

THE sound boomed across the open terrace like an artillery blank and the old crone backed away quickly.

Lunora smiled as the echoes rolled away over the desert, the statues on the lower terraces responding with muted pulses. "Years ago, when Father was away, I used to go up onto the roof and shout down at the top of my voice, set off the most wonderful echo trains. The whole place would boom for hours, drive the servants mad." She laughed pleasantly to herself at the recollection, as if it had been a long time ago.

"Try it now," I suggested. "Or is Mme. Charcot mad already?"

Lunora put a green-tipped finger to her lips. "Careful, you'll get me into trouble. Anyway, Mme. Charcot is not my servant."

"No? What is she then, your jailer?" We spoke mockingly, but I put a curve on the question; something about the Frenchwoman had made me suspect that she might have more than a small part in maintaining Lunora's illusions about herself. Reclining like a puma on the couch, she looked a lot less haunted than the gossip magazines had led me to believe the previous day. Was this a case of nature imitating art, had Lunora become convinced that her beauty *was* marred in some way? As far as I could judge now her features were smooth and flawless, her face a white oval, the lips a full hot pink.

I waited for her to reply, but she ignored me and began to stare out across the lagoon. Within a few seconds her personality had changed levels, once

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again she was the remote autocratic princess.

Unobserved, I slipped my hand into the tool-bag, drew out a tape spool. Clipping it into the player deck, I switched on the table. The statue vibrated slightly, and a low melodious chant murmured out into the still air.

Standing behind the statue, I watched Lunora respond to the music. The sounds mounted, steadily swelling as Lunora moved into the statue's focus. Gradually its rhythms quickened, its mood urgent and plaintive, unmistakably a lover's passion-song. A musicologist would have quickly identified the sounds as a transcription of the balcony duet from *Romeo and Juliet*, but to Lunora its only source was the statue. I had recorded the tape that morning, realizing it was the only method of saving the statue. Nevers' confusion of *Tosca* and *Creole Love Song* reminded me that I had the whole of classical opera in reserve. For ten thousand dollars I would gladly call once a day and feed in every aria from *Figaro* to *Moses and Aaron*.

Abruptly, the music fell away. Lunora had backed out of the statue's focus, was standing twenty feet from me. Behind her, in the doorway, was Mme. Charcot.

Lunora smiled briefly. "It seems to be in perfect order," she said. Without doubt she was gesturing me towards the door.

I hesitated, suddenly wondering whether to tell her the truth, my eyes searching her beautiful secret face.

Then Mme. Charcot came between us, smiling like a skull.

DID Lunora Goalen really believe that the sculpture was singing to her? For a fortnight, until the tape expired, it didn't matter. By then Nevers would have cashed the check and he and I would be on our way to Paris.

Within two or three days, though, I realized that I wanted to see Lunora again. Rationalizing, I told myself that the statue needed to be checked, that Lunora might discover the fraud. Twice during the next week I drove out to the summer house on the pretext of tuning the sculpture, but Mme. Charcot held me off. Once I telephoned, but again she intercepted me. When I saw Lunora she was driving at speed through Vermilion Sands in the Rolls-Royce, a dim glimmer of gold and jade in the deep back seat.

Finally I searched through my record albums, selected Toscanini conducting *Tristan and Isolde*, in the scene where Tristan mourns his parted lover, then carefully transcribed another tape.

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That night I drove down to Lagoon West, parked my car by the beach on the south shore and walked out onto the surface of the lake. In the moonlight the summer house half a mile away looked like an abstract movie set, a single light on the upper terrace illuminating the outlines of my statue. Stepping carefully across the fused silica, I made my way slowly towards it, fragments of the statue's song drifting by on the low breeze. Two hundred yards from the house I lay down on the warm sand, watching the lights of Vermilion Sands fade one by one like the melting jewels of a necklace.

Above, the statue sang into the blue night, its song never wavering. Lunora must have been sitting only a few feet above it, the music enveloping her like an overflowing fountain. Shortly after two o'clock it dies down and I saw her suddenly at the rail, the white ermine wrap around her sun-burnt shoulders stirring in the wind as she stared out at the brilliant moon.

Half an hour later I climbed the lake wall and walked along it to the spiral fire escape. The bougainvilla wreathed through the railings muffled the sounds of my feet on the metal steps, and I reached the upper terrace unnoticed. Far below, in her quarters on the north side, Mme. Charcot was asleep.

Swinging up onto the terrace, I moved quickly among the dark statues, drawing low murmurs from them as I passed.

I crouched down inside *Zero Orbit*, unlocked the control panel and inserted the fresh tape, slightly raising the volume.

As I left I could see down onto the west terrace twenty feet below, where Lunora lay asleep under the stars on an enormous velvet bed, like a lunar princess on a purple catafalque. Her face shone in the starlight, her loose hair veiling her naked breasts. Behind her a statue stood guard, intoning softly to itself as it pulsed to the sounds of her breathing.

THREE times I visited Lunora's house after midnight, taking with me another spool of tape, another love-song from my library. On the last visit I watched her sleeping until dawn rose across the desert, then fled down the stairway and across the sand, hiding among the cold pools of shadow whenever a car moved along the beach road.

All day I waited by the telephone in my villa, hoping she would call me. In the evening I walked out to the sand reefs, climbed one of the spires and watched Lunora on the terrace after dinner. She lay on a couch before the statue, and until long after midnight it played to her,

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endlessly singing. Its voice was now so strong that cars would slow down several hundred yards away, the drivers searching for the source of the melodies crossing the vivid evening air.

At last I recorded the final tape, for the first time in my own voice. Briefly I described the whole sequence of imposture, then quietly asked Lunora if she would sit for me and let me design a new sculpture to replace the fraud she had bought.

I clenched the tape tightly in my hand while I walked across the lake, looking up at the rectangular outline of the terrace.

As I reached up to the wall, a black-suited figure suddenly put his head over the ledge and looked down at me. It was Lunora's chauffeur.

Startled, I moved away across the sand. In the moonlight the chauffeur's white face flickered bonily. Then he backed silently into the shadows.

THE next evening, as I knew it would, the telephone finally rang.

"Mr. Milton, the statue has broken down again." Mme. Charcot's voice sounded sharp and strained. "Miss Goalen is extremely upset. You must come and repair it. Immediately."

I waited an hour before leaving, playing through the tape I had recorded the previous evening. This time I would be present when Lunora heard it.

Mme. Charcot was standing by the wide glass doors. I parked in the blue gravel court by the Rolls, as I walked over to her, I noticed how eerie the house sounded. All over it the statues were muttering to themselves, emitting low snaps and clicks, like the disturbed occupants of a zoo settling down with difficulty after a storm. Even Mme. Charcot looked worn and tense.

At the terrace she paused. "One moment, Mr. Milton, I will see if Miss Goalen is ready to receive you." She walked quietly towards the chaise lounge pulled up against the statue at the end of the terrace. Lunora was stretched out awkwardly across it, her hair disarrayed. She sat up irritably as Mme. Charcot approached.

"Is he here? Alice, whose car was that? Hasn't he come?"

"He is just preparing his equipment," Mme. Charcot told her soothingly. "Miss Lunora, let me fix your hair—"

"Alice, don't fuss! God, what's keeping him?" She sprang up and paced over to the statue, glowering silently out of the darkness like an Assyrian deity. While Mme. Charcot walked away Lunora suddenly sank on her knees before the statue, pressed her right cheek to its cold surface.

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Uncontrollably she began to sob, deep spasms shaking her shoulders.

"Wait, Mr. Milton!" Mme. Charcot held tightly to my elbow. "She will not want to see you for a few minutes." She added: "You are a great sculptor, Mr. Milton. You have given that statue a remarkable voice. It tells her all she needs to know."

I broke away and ran through the darkness.

"Lunora!"

She looked around, the hair over her face matted with tears. She leaned limply against the dark trunk of the statue, and I knelt down and held her hands, then tried to lift her to her feet.

She wrenched away from me. "Fix it! Hurry, what are you waiting for? Make the statue sing again!"

I WAS certain that she no longer recognized me. I stepped back, the spool of tape in my hand. "What's the matter with her?" I whispered to Mme. Charcot. "The sounds don't really come from the statue, surely she realizes that?"

Mme. Charcot's head lifted. "What do you mean—not from the statue?"

I showed her the tape. "This isn't a true sonic sculpture. The music is played off these magnetic tapes."

A chuckle rasped briefly from Mme. Charcot's throat. "Well, put it in nonetheless, monsieur. She doesn't care where it comes from. She is interested in the statue, not you."

I hesitated, watching Lunora, still hunched like a supplicant at the foot of the statue.

"You mean—?" I started to say incredulously. "Do you mean she's in love with the *statue?*"

Mme. Charcot's hooded reptilian eyes summed up all my naivete.

"Not with the statue," she said darkly. "With *herself.*"

For a moment I stood there among the murmurring sculpture, then dropped the spool on the floor and turned away.

THEY left Lagoon West the next day.

For a week I remained at my villa, then drove along the beach road towards the summer house one evening after Nevers told me that they had gone.

The house was closed, the statues standing motionless in the darkness. My footsteps echoed away among the balconies and terraces, and the house reared up into the sky like a tomb. All the sculpture had been switched off, and I realized how dead and monumental non-sonic sculpture must have seemed.

Zero Orbit had also gone. I assumed that Lunora had taken it

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with her, so immersed in her self-love that she preferred a clouded mirror which had once told her of her beauty to no mirror at all, and that as she sat on some penthouse veranda in Venice or Paris with the great statue towering into the dark sky like an extinct symbol she would hear again the lays it has sung. Perhaps sometimes she would play over the last tape I had left her.

Six months later Nevers commissioned another statue from me, and I went out one dusk to the sand reefs where the sonic sculpture grow. As I approached, they were creaking in the wind whenever the thermal gradients cut through them. I walked up the long slopes, listening to them mewl and whine, searching for one that would serve as the sonic core for a new statue.

Somewhere ahead in the darkness, I heard a familiar phrase, a garbled fragment of a human voice. Startled, I ran on, feeling between the dark barbs and helixes.

Then, lying in a hollow below the ridge, I found the source. Half-buried under the sand like the skeleton of a colossus, were twenty or thirty pieces of metal, the dismembered trunk and wings of my statue. Many of the pieces had taken root again and were emitting a thin haunted sound, disconnected fragments of the testament to Lunora Goalen I had dropped on her terrace.

As I walked away down the slope, the white sand pouring into my footprints like a succession of occluding hour glasses, the sounds of my voice whined faintly through the metal gardens like a forgotten lover whispering over a dead harp.

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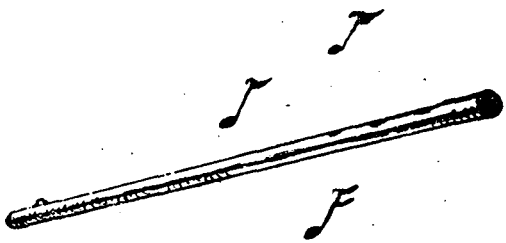
THE FIFE OF BODIDHARMA

By CORDWAINER SMITH



This licorice stick blew a tune that was definitely not for squares . . .

Music (said Confucius) *awakens the mind, propriety finishes it, melody completes it.* The *Lun Yu,* Book VIII, Chapter 8

I

IT WAS perhaps in the second period of the proto-Indian Harappa culture, perhaps earlier in the very dawn of metal, that a goldsmith accidentally found a formula to make a magical fife. To him, the fife became death or bliss, an avenue to choosable salvations or dooms. Among later men, the fife might be recognized as a chancy pre-discovery of psionic powers with sonic triggering.

Whatever it was, it worked! Long before the Buddha, long-haired Dravidian priests learned that it worked.

Cast mostly in gold despite the goldsmith's care with the speculum alloy, the fife emitted shrill whistlings but it also transmitted supersonic vibrations in a narrow range —narrow and intense enough a range to rearrange synapses in the brain and to modify the basic emotions of the hearer.

The goldsmith did not long survive his instrument. They found him dead.

The fife became the prop-

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erty of priests; after a short, terrible period of use and abuse, it was buried in the tomb of a great king.

II

Robbers found the fife, tried it and died. Some died amid bliss, some amid hate, others in a frenzy of fear and delusion. A strong survivor, trembling after the ordeal of inexpressibly awakened sensations and emotions, wrapped the fife in a page of holy writing and presented it to Bodidharma the Blessed One just before Bodidharma began his unbelievably arduous voyage from India across the ranges of the spines of the world over to far Cathay.

Bodidharma the Blessed One, the man who had seen Persia, the aged one bringing wisdom, came across the highest of all mountains in the year that the Northern Wei dynasty of China moved their capital out of divine Loyang. (Elsewhere in the world where men reckoned the years from the birth of their Lord Jesus Christ the year was counted as Anno Domini 554, but in the high land between India and China the message of Christianity had not yet arrived and the word of the Lord Gautama Buddha was still the sweetest gospel to reach the ears of men.)

Bodidharma, clad by only a thin robe, climbed across the glaciers. For food he drank the air, spicing it with prayer. Cold winds cut his old skin, his tired bones; for a cloak he drew his sanctity about him and bore within his indomitable heart the knowledge that the pure, unspoiled message of the Lord Gautama Buddha had, by the will of time and chance themselves, to be carried from the Indian world to the Chinese.

Once beyond the peaks and passes he descended into the cold frigidity of high desert. Sand cut his feet but the skin did not bleed because he was shod in sacred spells and magical charms.

At last animals approached. They came in the ugliness of their sin, ignorance and shame. Beasts they were, but more than beasts—they were the souls of the wicked condemned to endless rebirth, now incorporated in vile forms because of the wickedness with which they had once rejected the teachings of eternity and the wisdom which lay before them as plainly as the trees or the nighttime heavens. The more vicious the man, the more ugly the beast: this was the rule. Here

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in the desert the beasts were very ugly.

Bodidharma the Blessed One shrank back.

He did not desire to use the weapon. "O Forever Blessed One, seated in the Lotus Flower, Buddha, help me!"

Within his heart he felt no response. The sinfulness and wickedness of these beasts was such that even the Buddha had turned his face gently aside and would offer no protection to his messenger, the missionary Bodidharma.

Reluctantly Bodidharma took out his fife.

The fife was a dainty weapon, twice the length of a man's finger. Golden in strange, almost ugly forms, it hinted at a civilization which no one living in India now remembered. The fife had come out of the early beginnings of mankind, had ridden across a mass of ages, a legion of years, and survived as a testimony to the power of early men.

At the end of the fife was a little whistle. Four touch holes gave the fife pitches and a wide variety of combination of notes.

Blown once the fife called to holiness. This occurred if all stops were closed.

Blown twice with all stops opened the fife carried its own power. This power was strange indeed. It magnified every chance emotion of each living thing within range of its sound.

Bodidharma the Blessed One had carried the fife because it comforted him. Closed, its notes reminded him of the sacred message of the Three Treasures of the Buddha which he carried from India to China. Opened, its notes brought bliss to the innocent and their own punishment to the wicked. Innocence and wickedness were not determined by the fife but by the hearers themselves, whoever they might be. The trees which heard these notes in their own tree-like way struck even more mightily into the earth and up to the sky reaching for nourishment with new but dim and tree-like hope. Tigers became more tigerish, frogs more froggy, men more good or bad, as their characters might dispose them.

"Stop!" called Bodidharma the Blessed One to the beasts.

Tiger and wolf, fox and jackal, snake and spider, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called again.

Hoof and claw, sting and tooth, eyes alive, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called for the third time.

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Still they advanced. He blew the fife wide open, twice, clear and loud.

Twice, clear and loud.

The animals stopped. At the second note, they began to thresh about, imprisoned even more deeply by the bestiality of their own natures. The tiger snarled at his own front paws, the wolf snapped at his own tail, the jackal ran fearfully from his own shadow, the spider hid beneath the darkness of rocks, and the other vile beasts who had threatened the Blessed One let him pass.

Bodidharma the Blessed One went on. In the streets of the new capital at Anyang the gentle gospel of Buddhism was received with curiosity, with calm, and with delight. Those voluptuous barbarians, the Toba Tartars, who had made themselves masters of North China now filled their hearts and souls with the hope of death instead of the fear of destruction. Mothers wept with pleasure to know that their children, dying, had been received into blessedness. The Emperor himself laid aside his sword in order to listen to the gentle message that had come so bravely over illimitable mountains.

When Bodidharma the Blessed One died he was buried in the outskirts of Anyang, his fife in a sacred onyx case beside his right hand. There he and it both slept for thirteen hundred and forty years.

III

In the year 1894 a German explorer—so he fancied himself to be—looted the tomb of the Blessed One in the name of science.

Villagers caught him in the act and drove him from the hillside.

He escaped with only one piece of loot, an onyx case with a strange copper-like fife. Copper it seemed to be, although the metal was not as corroded as actual copper should have been after so long a burial in intermittently moist country. The fife was filthy. He cleaned it enough to see that it was fragile and to reveal the unChinese character of the declarations along its side.

He did not clean it enough to try blowing it: *he* lived because of that.

The fife was presented to a small municipal museum named in honor of a German grand duchess. It occupied case No. 34 of the Dorotheum and lay there for another fifty-one years.

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IV

The B-29s had gone. They had roared off in the direction of Rastatt.

Wolfgang Huene climbed out of the ditch. He hated himself, he hated the Allies, and he almost hated Hitler. A Hitler youth, he was handsome, blond, tall, craggy. He was also brave, sharp, cruel and clever. He was a Nazi. Only in a Nazi world could he hope to exist. His parents, he knew, were soft rubbish. When his father had been killed in a bombing, Wolfgang did not mind. When his mother, half-starved, died of influenza, he did not worry about her. She was old and did not matter. Germany mattered.

Now the Germany which mattered to him was coming apart, ripped by explosions, punctured by shock waves, and fractured by the endless assault of Allied air power.

Wolfgang as a young Nazi did not know fear, but he did know bewilderment.

In an animal, instinctive way, he knew—without thinking about it—that if Hitlerism did not survive he himself would not survive either. He even knew that he was doing his best, what little best there was still left to do. He was looking for spies while reporting the weak-hearted ones who complained against the Fuehrer or the war. He was helping to organize the Volkssturm and he had hopes of becoming a Nazi guerrilla even if the Allies did cross the Rhine. Like an animal, but like a very intelligent animal, he knew he had to fight, while at the same time, he realized that the fight might go against him.

He stood in the street watching the dust settle after the bombing.

The moonlight was clear on the broken pavement.

This was a quiet part of the city. He could hear the fires downtown making a crunching sound, like the familiar noise of his father eating lettuce. Near himself he could hear nothing; he seemed to be all alone, under the moon, in a tiny forgotten corner of the world.

He looked around.

His eyes widened in astonishment: the Dorotheum museum had been blasted open.

Idly, he walked over to the ruin. He stood in the dark doorway.

Looking back at the street and then up at the sky to make sure that it was safe to show a light, he then flashed on his pocket electric light and cast the beam around the

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display room. Cases were broken, in most of them glass had fallen in on the exhibits. Window glass looked like puddles of ice in the cold moonlight as it lay broken on the old stone floors.

Immediately in front of him a display case sagged crazily.

He cast his flashlight beam on it. The light picked up a short tube which looked something like the barrel of an antique pistol. Wolfgang reached for the tube. He had played in a band and he knew what it was. It was a fife.

He held it in his hand a moment and then stuck it in his jacket. He cast the beam of his light once more around the museum and then went out in the street. It was no use letting the police argue.

He could now hear the laboring engines of trucks as they coughed, sputtering with their poor fuel, climbing up the hill toward him.

He took his light in his pocket. Feeling the fife, he took it out.

Instinctively, the way that any human being would, he put his fingers over all four of the touch holes before he began to blow. The fife was stopped up.

He applied force.

He blew hard.

The fife sounded.

A sweet note, golden beyond imagination, softer and wilder than the most thrilling notes of the finest symphony in the world, sounded in his ears.

He felt different, relieved, happy.

His soul, which he did not know he had, achieved a condition of peace which he had never before experienced. In that moment a small religion was born. It was a small religion because it was confined to the mind of a single brutal adolescent, but it was a true religion, nevertheless, because it had the complete message of hope, comfort and fulfillment of an order beyond the limits of this life. Love, and the tremendous meaning of love, poured through his mind. Love relaxed the muscles of his back and even let his aching eyelids drop over his eyes in the first honest fatigue he had admitted for many weeks.

The Nazi in him had been drained off. The call to holiness, trapped in the forgotten magic of Bodidharma's fife, had sounded even to him. Then he made his mistake, a mortal one.

The fife had no more malice than a gun before it is fired, no more hate than a river before it swallows a human

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body, no more anger than a height from which a man may slip; the fife had its own power, partly in sound itself, but mostly in the mechano-psionic linkage which the unusual alloy and shape had given the Harappa goldsmith forgotten centuries before.

Wolfgang Huene blew again, holding the fife between two fingers, with none of the stops closed. This time the note was wild. In a terrible and wholly convincing moment of vision he reincarnated in himself all the false resolutions, the venomous patriotism, the poisonous bravery of Hitler's Reich. He was once again a Hitler youth, consummately a Nordic man. His eyes gleamed with a message he felt pouring out of himself.

He blew again.

This second note was the perfecting note — the note which had protected Bodidharma the Blessed One fifteen hundred and fifty years before in the frozen desert north of Tibet.

Huene became even more Nazi. No longer the boy, no longer the human being. He was the magnification of himself. He became all fighter, but he had forgotten who he was or what it was that he was fighting for.

The blacked-out trucks came up the hill. His blind eyes looked at them. Fife in hand, he snarled at them.

A crazy thought went through his mind. "Allied tanks . . ."

He ran wildly toward the leading truck. The driver did not see more than a shadow and jammed on the brakes too late. The front bumper burst a soft obstruction.

The front wheel covered the body of the boy. When the truck stopped the boy was dead and the fife, half-crushed, was pressed against the rock of a German road.

V

Hagen von Grün was one of the German rocket scientists who worked at Huntsville, Alabama. He had gone on down to Cape Canaveral to take part in the fifth series of American launchings. This included in the third shot of the series a radio transmitter designed to hit standard wave radio immediately beneath the satellite. The purpose was to allow ordinary listeners throughout the world to take part in the tracking of the satellite. This particular satellite was designed to have a relatively short life. With good luck it would last as long as five weeks, not longer.

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The miniaturized transmitter was designed to pick up the sounds, minute though they might be, produced by the heating and cooling of the shell and to transmit a sound pattern reflecting the heat, of cosmic rays and also to a certain degree to relay the visual images in terms of a sound pattern.

Hagen von Grün was present at the final assembly. A small part of the assembly consisted of inserting a tube which would serve the double function of a resonating chamber between the outer skin of the satellite and a tiny microphone half the size of a sweet pea which would then translate the sound made by the outer shell into radio signals which amateurs on the earth surface fifteen hundred miles below could follow.

Von Grün no longer smoked. He had stopped smoking that fearful night in which Allied planes bombed the truck convoy carrying his colleagues and himself to safety. Though he had managed to scrounge cigarettes throughout the war he had even given up carrying his cigarette holder. He carried instead an odd old copper fife he had found in the highway and had put back into shape. Superstitious at his luck in living, and grateful that the fife reminded him not to smoke, he never bothered to clean it out and blow it. He had weighed it, found its specific gravity, measured it, like the good German that he was, down to the last millimeter and milligram but he kept it in his pocket though it was a little clumsy to carry.

Just as they put the last part of the nose cone together, the strut broke.

It could not break, but it did.

It would have taken five minutes and a ride down the elevator to find a new tube to serve as a strut.

Acting on an odd impulse, Hagen von Grün remembered that his lucky fife was within a millimeter of the length required, and was of precisely the right diameter. The holes did not matter. He picked up a file, filed the old fife and inserted it.

They closed the skin of the satellite. They sealed the cone.

Seven hours later the message rocket took off, the first one capable of reaching every standard wave radio on earth. As Hagen von Grün watched the great rocket climb he wondered to himself "Does it make any difference whether those stops were open or closed?"

THE END

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Beauty, said the poet, is in the eye of the beholder—and he never even knew about

CEDRIC

By WINSTON MARKS

WHEN I retired from pro tennis I followed the horses for several years, but now I follow Cedric Dearborn. It's more fun and much more profitable.

Money was on my mind the afternoon I first laid eyes on Cedric. The horses cost me plenty the past season, and I had drifted down to the Bahamas where I heard I might pick up a few nickels with a series of exhibition tennis matches. My old Davis Cup steam was about gone, but a tennis bum like me will trade on his name as long as he can lift a racket and fool the local highschool boys with a reverse twist service.

Well, the rumor was an empty one. My name was not exactly magic when I dropped it at the local tennis clubs. Anyhow, there was no one around at the time worthy of a match.

So this particular afternoon I was sitting on the patio of a little resort, nestled in the palms, listening to the surf and watching a couple of dubs bat balls at each other on the hard court. I was awaiting the return of the resort manager to apply for a job as tennis pro for the winter, and I was even willing to do a little square-dance calling on the side, if necessary, to get my board and rum.

Because of just such "dry spells" in my erratic fortunes, I have always remained a bachelor. Even approaching forty, the ladies still find my lanky, Gary Cooperish frame, crew haircut and horse-face attractive. I can always rob

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the recreation director of his job at these winter resorts if I stick around a week.

It was a stroke of luck for me that Cedric Dearborn chose this afternoon to make one of his rare mistakes. He was playing singles with a fat man in trunks and sandals. This fellow lumbered around the cement court like a gouty walrus, but he hit the ball hard and placed it well. He should have beaten Dearborn easily.

So I got interested when Cedric kept yelling the score which was piling up in his own favor. He was a neatly built little fellow, around fifty years old judging from his carefully combed gray hair. He came about up to my armpits, and he played an amateurish game of lob and chop with remarkable enthusiasm for his age.

As I watched I could see why he was winning. He had fat boy rattled. Cedric chattered pleasantly and incessantly. Such a practice is not normally good court manners. It can throw a fairly good opponent off his game.

When the set ended 6-3 in Cedric's favor, fat boy gave up, and I found Cedric standing before me in his brilliant shorts and white T-shirt, introducing himself and challenging me.

"Sun's pretty hot out there," I apologized.

"Good for you," he insisted. "You have a gorgeous tan. Won't hurt you a bit."

"No, really," I lied, "my racket hasn't arrived yet."

"You can use George's. Hey George!" He trotted after his recent rival and came back with fat boy's racket.

"See here, Mr. Dearborn," I said, "I'm really not in the mood!"

Cedric took a step backward into the sunlight and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. The glitter of a rather large stone setting in his ring made me blink. He looked at me and said, "Come on, now, let's play some tennis."

I found myself being led to the court, and a moment later he chirped, "Service!" and lashed at the ball. It floated over the net after a while, and I dinked it back. The game was on.

A few minutes later I was still wondering what I was doing out here with this gabby little runt, when he announced the end of the first game. He had won it!

I won my serve, but he forced me into a deuce game first. Then he won his service

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again. With one eye on the driveway watching for the manager, I slopped around the court, chasing his short chops that dropped just over the net like lead footballs, or else spun up into the glaring sun making me squint and stretch. Soon it was 5-2, his favor.

This was ridiculous. We had only one spectator, a small-bodied girl in a big sun hat, but that was enough to ruin my reputation as a tennis teacher if this clod beat me.

So I bore down hard. I took the next game by sizzling in some serves, and I managed to win another by generating a lot of sweat. Then I focused my mind to the task. What was he doing to me? His chatter began to register in my ears. And then the amazing fact became apparent. *He was calling my shots for me, and I was obeying.*

He'd move to the right court, hold out his racket and yell, "Right here, please—that's a good fellow!" and damned if I wouldn't plant my return right where he'd asked for it!

Well, I'd fix that. Instead of crossing him up, I simply threw a little forearm into my drives and blistered the fuzz off the ball.

"Out!" he called, cheerfully. "Forty-thirty—point set!"

He served, called for my return to his deep backhand, and I smashed his lob right at his racket, but it was an inch too high. "Out again!" Cedric called delightedly. "That's my set. Thanks. I've had enough now."

"Just a minute," I said. jumping over the net. "Let's you buy me a drink."

"Swell, fine." He turned to the spectator and said, "Come on, honey, meet Mr. Seadon. Hugh Seadon, this is Sally Dearborn, my wife." She nodded, but I was too distracted to pay her much attention.

We took a secluded table and ordered drinks. When the waiter had brought them and gone I said, "Mr. Dearborn, do you realize you just won a set of tennis from a former U. S. singles champion and member of the Davis Cup Team?"

"Well, my little game is improving." His small, straight nose crinkled with pleasure. Then the smile faded like a bed sheet pulled straight with a snap. "You are kidding, of course."

"I'm not fooling, Mr. Dearborn. You made me look a little ridiculous. And that's important. I am here to get a job teaching tennis to the guests. Luckily, only your

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wife witnessed the drubbing you gave me. I'll have to ask you to keep our match a secret. Your wife too."

"Aren't you being a bit of a poor sport in this matter?"

I bit my teeth together so the muscles stood out on my jaw the way Cooper does when he's facing six-shooter odds. "I am being practical, Mr. Dearborn. You practiced a little black sportsmanship yourself out on that court, and if you boast to your friends of beating me I'll pound you into your tall silk hat with your rabbits!"

"Black sportsmanship? Tall silk hat?" He spread his hands as if feeling for rain, and the look of innocence on his narrow, sensitive face was of professional quality.

"Okay," I said, "I'll draw pictures. I have played around with hypnotism enough to catch your little act out there. I missed your original gimmick, but you were a little obvious with your suggestions, Mr. Dearborn. You must like to win very much."

His hands were both on the table wrapped around his whiskey glass. He sloshed his drink around, and his ring glinted at me. "I do like winning at tennis," he admitted. "I never lose an argument, either. *Observe the small, black, automatic pistol in my hand.*"

His hands never left the table. They simply separated. In his left was the high-ball glass, but in his right hand was the gun he described. I'm afraid a little of the menace went out of my jaw muscles, but I stuck to my point. "You are still at it. There is no gun in your right hand."

Cedric chuckled mildly. "If I pull the trigger you will have a beastly time convincing your subconscious mind that you do not have a .38 caliber hole in your sternum. Now we will go for a walk on the beach where it isn't so quiet. You precede us—leisurely. Do not speak, please."

My feet gathered under me, I arose casually and strolled down to the beach. There seemed to be no compulsion in my mind. I raged inwardly, tried to swear outwardly and sent a dozen murderous commands to my legs and arms. But my whole body was in free wheeling. With the sound of the waves I couldn't hear their footsteps in the soft, dry sand, but their voices told me I was not alone.

Sally was saying, "You did it again. Your silly pride in your tennis, this time. Now we'll have to move on. Cedric,

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I like it here. Why did you have to go spoil it?"

"We haven't had this problem in quite a while," Cedric reflected. "It would spoil our fun to have him around—unless—"

"You aren't going to put *him* on your blackmail list, surely!"

"My dear Sally, I dislike murder as much as you, so what else is there to do?"

There was a brief silence, and I felt as if I were being scrutinized like a slightly over-aged side of beef that a careless butcher is debating whether he dare grind into hamburger. We were approaching a rise to a low cliff with white surf churning and grinding into jagged coral reefs below it. I'm no mind reader, but I was sure we all three had one possibility in mind.

Unexpectedly, Cedric said, "Seadon, I release you. Act as you will!" I tripped over my own feet and sprawled in the sand. Before I could get up he sat down facing me and drew Sally beside him. "If you are looking for a job, Mr. Seadon, you must need money. I have a suggestion to make—"

Involuntarily I glanced down at his ring, but he had rotated the stone into his palm, and only the gold band showed, matching the one on Sally's ring finger. He smiled. "I should have said proposition. I like your looks, your tennis and your apparent intelligence. Would you care to join up with us?"

I guess Sally was more startled than I. Her blonde head swiveled so sharply that it twisted loose from the oversize straw hat which caught in the breeze and flipped off. For the first time I got a good look at her. And what I saw *belonged* on a sunny beach in a Paris playsuit. She was the kind of morsel a jaded bachelor my age has to dream of to maintain interest in the opposite sex. She was that and more. They copied her eyes when they decided upon the color for a tropical sky. Her golden hair wafted horizontally like a delicate floss, even in the gentlest of Bahamas' zephyrs. The clean, fine lines of her face and all the rest of her was why people spend money on television sets and Broadway revues.

I stared at her. She stared at Cedric, and after a long moment I knew Cedric was staring at me. "Come to, Hugh, and I'll elucidate."

I tore loose my raptured gaze, and Cedric went on. "Unless you are one of these

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typical cardiacs who ruin their lives with the ambition to own everything in sight, I think you will like being with us. Your duties will be relatively light and, I trust, pleasant: teach me better tennis, amuse Sally—and keep your mouth shut at appropriate moments. In return I shall buy for you an annuity which will be validated the day we part company, provided we do so amicably. It will pay you $500 a month for the balance of your life, and until I put it in effect I shall provide you with what cash you need. Except that you may not accumulate a yacht, real estate or a lot of unnecessary baggage with my funds. We travel, you see. The price and quality of toothbrushes is pretty much the same wherever you go."

The man must be chairman of the board of Murder, Incorporated, I decided. But another look at Sally and it was still mighty tempting. "Would you consider it prying if I asked you your bsuiness?" I inquired.

"Not at all," he said pleasantly. "I was a crystallographer. Now I have an indedependent and very legitimate income, you might say. I control Hollywood and I own television. By proxies, of course."

Whoops! The man was getting silly. I addressed Sally for the first time. "Are you his nurse or his keeper?"

She flashed an indulgent smile with teeth right from selected oysters. "Neither. I tumbled to his little hobby a year ago. I'm just along for the fun. He promised me an annuity, too."

Cedric slipped a thin billfold from his shorts. "Money talks," he said, "even to skeptics. Here's some change." He handed me two one hundred-dollar bills.

"You'll get used to Cedric," Sally said, pouring white sand over her slender ankles obviously enjoying the sensation.

She lied. I never have gotten used to Cedric.

I have often dreamed of fabulous jobs, but nothing that ever stacked up to this deal. We fooled around the resort for a couple of weeks. I'd play an hour or two of tennis with Cedric, demonstrating and practicing flat strokes. Then we'd all have a cold drink, a five-dollar lunch and siesta. Cedric would read while Sally and I went exploring along the beach. Evenings we danced and drank ourselves to a congenial glow, took a late dip in the surf and went to bed.

The part that made it so

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good, though, was the part that made it so rough. Sally.

I was so much in love with her you could scrape it off me with a putty knife. At first I considered it was just one of those things I had to endure, but then I learned that Cedric and Sally lived in separate suites.

This discovery broke down my resolve to keep my lip buttoned. I had feared asking any more questions lest my golden bubble go pop! The thought that all was not as it should be in the Dearborn marriage, however, turned the moths loose on my self-restraint. I had to know.

The following afternoon I got Sally out in a glass-bottom boat. We puddled around a small lagoon for a bit, then I threw it at her. "Are you really married to Cedric?"

"Nope! Oh, look, there's another one of those flat ditties with the purple fringe. I want it." She flipped off her big hat and went over the side in a splashless but sensational dive. She came up empty-handed, hair plastered around her neck and face like golden silt. "Stuck to the bottom," she gasped as I pulled her up and over. There was so little to her Bikini that she barely dripped after one good shake.

I took her little shoulders in my hands and pressed her down to the bottom of the boat. She smiled up at me. "Don't look so tragic, Hugh. I won't hold out on you. What do you want to know now?"

"If you aren't married—how come, then?"

"Convenience," she said. "It causes less notice for a couple registered as man and wife to live in separate rooms than it would vice versa—if you follow me."

"You mean you aren't—you don't—?"

"Cedric hates women and stool pigeons. When I found out his little secret like you did, he had the same three choices he did with you: murder me, pay me blackmail, or keep me with him. His blackmail list was getting so big and complicated it worried him. He said I was too beautiful an art object to murder, so here I am, same basis as you, with a slightly different set of functions."

"Which are?" By now my heart was pounding ripples in the hair on my chest. I wanted to hear the worst and get it over.

She stirred under my hands, and I let her sit up. She began drying her hair. "Well, I ward off other women by wearing this," she showed me

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the plain gold band sans engagement ring. "And I protect his anonymity. You see, his name is not Dearborn. Among his business associates he is well known for his women-hating tendencies. His bachelorhood is legendary on Wall Street and in Los Angeles. So when he drops out of sight, I appear, and we make like rich ranchers from Wisconsin."

Now the big question. "And what do you think of him?"

"I like the life he leads," she said simply. She looked up from the cave of the oversize towel. "Now, let me ask one. We've been together for almost two weeks, and you haven't even tried to kiss me. You say you are a bachelor, too. For the same reason as Cedric?"

I started to reach for her to supply the obvious answer, but the rattle of oar-locks stopped me. It was Cedric. His dory bumped along-side of ours. "Hi!" he said pleasantly enough. "Just dropped out to tell you that tongues are clucking ashore. I guess I over-rated your intelligence, Hugh. Can't have my wife involved in a local scandal."

He rotated the ring on his slender finger. The tropical sun caught in the stone, and I waited his words with cold fear. He would command me to kill my love for Sally, I was sure. And I knew if he did our pleasant arrangement was at an end. He might as well cut my heart out.

But he did something even worse. "I don't understand what you see in Sally," he said calmly. "See how hooked her nose is. And that dreadful stringy black hair, and those thick ankles. Look, Hugh! See those ugly splotches of freckles all over her fat body."

I looked, and of course it was so.

Cedric nodded and started to pull shoreward. "You'll thank me for this, Hugh. It was either this or lose your—shall we say, friedship?"

It was such an obscene thing to do that if Sally hadn't grabbed my arm I would have dived over the side and tried to drown Cedric. "Hold it, Hugh," she said quietly. "You haven't lost anything you had before. I hadn't decided whether to fall in love with you, and probably it would have been a mistake. Life can get complicated awfully fast. It will be easier this way. Without a daily ration of your adoring looks, I think I can keep my head better, too." But two tears rolled down her long hawk-like beak and splashed ludicrously on the glass bot-

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tom. A little striped fish nosed the spot where they hit and darted to the depths to relay the gossip to the shellfish.

I stared at Sally, head to foot, until she shivered from my expression, covered herself completely with the beach towel and turned her back to me. But I couldn't superimpose my mental image of her real self on the revised painting that Cedric had set before my eyes.

"What kind of damned black magic is this?" I demanded.

Sally's voice was calm. "Cedric has a terrible power, Hugh. But he rarely uses it for evil purposes. Don't judge him too quickly. Talk to him this evening."

I rowed in and went to the bar, but six shots of rye failed to dispel the coldness in my stomach. I was as confused as a highschool boy who sees his girl kissing the football captain.

If a man's emotions of love were so completely dependent upon the vapid imagery of his eyes, how could he trust any of his senses? I took my misery to my $25-a-day room and let my liquor-soaked brain whirl itself to sleep.

It was after six when I awakened. Cedric would be dressing for dinner. I went to his suite and knocked. He let me in. "I expected you." He lifted the phone and asked room service to send up two orders of duck. "Sally said she'd like to eat alone, and I think you want to talk. So let's eat here, eh?"

"Fine!" I said belligerently. He stretched out on a pillow-banked couch, and I straddled a straight backed chair. Soft South American music came from the wall-speaker. The open balcony doors let in the rank sweetness of the nearby plantations and strips of intervening jungle growth. It was a night for romance, complete with a low-climbing crescent of moon. So here I sat with a misogynist in his bachelor apartment.

He beat me to the first remark. "You say you like to hunt and fish. I love it. We'll fly up to Florida and do some deep-sea fishing next week. Later we'll go after some big game in Africa. I find your companionship pleasant. I hope nothing changes it. It's worked out so well to now."

I ignored the amenities. "What you did to Sally, or rather, to me, this afternoon. That's got to stop! If you throw a hypnotic noose around me every time I have a normal impulse that dis-

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pleases you I'll be a walking zombie," I said.

Cedric laughed shortly, then again and finally broke out into a mild convulsion. When he caught his breath he spoke to the low-raftered ceiling of stained hardwood. "I free him of a compulsion that has him drooling around like a seven-foot ape in mating season, and he accuses me of turning him into a zombie!" He chuckled some more. "Perhaps a woman's attraction for the average male is not properly termed hypnotism, my friend, but I assure you it can be no less compulsive. Which is the key-stone of my aversion to woman-kind."

His face approached near sobriety. "No, as long as you are with us, I promise you I will not lift my command to look upon Sally as you found her this afternoon. But if it is diversion you want—"

He bounced to his feet, poured me a stiff drink and squatted cross legged under a lamp. His ring flickered, and the irridescent sparkles flashed around the darkened room like the old ballroom crystals in the colored spots. "Picture three dancing girls—" he began, and his voice took on a delighted dramatic whisper as he described them to me. He told me of the music to which they danced and their costumes and movements. And they appeared before us. Right out of the lushest Hollywood spectacle I witnessed a typical harem performance complete with veils and oriental head-jerks.

In the midst of the demonstration the waiter knocked, pushed the room service wagon into the middle of the dancers. Cedric waved him out. So genuine was the illusion that I expected the girls to trip and stumble over our duck dinners, but they danced right through them until Cedric clapped his hands and said, "All right, girls, back to Hollywood. Phtt!"

They disappeared, and so did the food cart. I said, "Cedric, would you mind materializing the dinners? You overdid the vanishing act." He laughed again. "You concentrate so beautifully. You must enjoy movies very much. Very well, Hugh, you may see the food cart again."

It was there all the time, of course, and I knew it, but my eyes refused to acknowledge it until he spoke the words of release. He offered me a platter of duck, but I wasn't hungry now. The illusions themselves weren't upsetting, but the conflict with reality was

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giving me a slight case of head-spin.

Cedric looked concerned. "You are, perhaps, despising yourself for the ease with which I have manipulated your senses." He tore into the duck and spoke between mouthfuls. "I will restore your self-confidence. You are no different than any other subject in your vulnerability. No different from myself."

"That can't be," I objected. "Every one knows that many people can't be hypnotized at all. So I'm not like all people."

"Quit abusing your self-esteem. Ordinary hypnotism is a clumsy operation and barely penetrates the basic mind. Many can resist such crude bludgeoning of the mind. But no one resists Cedric!" He caressed the gem on his finger.

"What the devil is your gimmick?" I demanded.

"You wouldn't understand," he said. My expression of annoyance at his patronizing remark caused him to smile.

"Very well. This handsome stone has a tiny chip of specially polarized crystal at the apex. A flicker of light from it sensitizes the subconscious mind to any sensual suggestion. For a moment the conscious mind is helpless to censor or resist these suggestions. And as you have experienced, a properly planted command has the power of compulsion. Now, if you want the neuro-semantic background to this explanation—"

"Skip it," I told him, "I'm lost already. But how do you cash in on it? You don't go around mesmerizing bank cashiers, I hope."

"Not selectively," he said. "But anyone who likes movies or television contributes indirectly to my enterprises. You see, all cinema screens and television view-plates are coated with my crystals. How else do you suppose intelligent people could be induced to become absorbed in grade B pictures and the hog-slop commercials that are the essence of profit in entertainment and advertising?"

"I've wondered about that," I admitted.

"Have some duck," he invited.

I told him no thanks. At that moment I would have more enjoyed breaking bread with a snake-charmer. I had a case of mental indigestion to settle before I could think of eating. I told him thanks for the confidences and I thought I'd turn in early.

I got half way to the door when it burst open, and Sally

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moved her ungainly, stodgy little body into the line of my retreat. She was high. " 'Lo, everybody. Have a drink!" She had half a magnum of champagne in her freckled hand, and she insisted that Cedric and I drink a toast with her. She went to the liquor cabinet, turned her back to us and poured two goblets full. She delivered them to us and came back with the bottle which she hoisted on high.

"To the three of us," she said happily. Cedric and I drank off the tingly stuff and watched Sally struggle with the long neck jug. I thought her ridiculous long nose must certainly get in the way, but she managed to slip past it and spill the pale amber wine down her chin.

Suddenly she dropped the bottle, grabbed me by the hand and said, "Come on, I want to dance. 'Night Cedric!" He looked at us curiously, grimaced at me as though to say, "Sorry, chum," and waved us good night. I guided Sally to the door with some difficulty, and she slammed it shut with abandon.

It was no sooner closed than she straightened up and beckoned me across the hall to her suite. Inside she shushed me and left her own door open a crack. In about a minute she apparently heard what she had been waiting for. She pulled me back across the hall and into Cedric's apartment. He was sprawled on the floor, head cocked and snoring heavily.

"What's this about?" I demanded. Ignoring me she reached over and gently peeled back one of Cedric's eyelids. The pupil was rolled back out of sight.

"I may not be as subtle, but I'm just as effective, you must admit," she said brightly. "He's out. Now let's talk. You and me."

She pulled up a chair opposite mine and looked me in the eye. I stared back. She was cold sober. It was still almost shocking to note the transformation of her appearance, but some of the curse was removed by the silvery evening gown she was wearing. The ugly ankles were concealed, at least. As I looked the essence of her seemed to emerge once more. I closed my eyes, and there she was before me. She spoke again and I kept my eyes closed.

"Hugh, I've been thinking."

"Yes, Sally?"

"I—I don't like your not seeing me—as I am. It bothers me. A lot!"

The tinkle of her voice

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strengthened the angelic vision against my closed lids. "Vanity," I said.

"It's worse than that," she said sadly. "Cedric may have solved your problem, but he loused me up. Somebody once wrote that it was a man's eyes that makes a woman truly beautiful. And, Hugh—since this afternoon I don't feel beautiful in anyone's eyes. I guess Cedric sort of made up my mind for me."

I opened my eyes and this time there was no shock. I took her in my arms, long nose, freckles and all. We kissed and two weeks' pent up flames burst between us. I made a fascinating discovery. At last there was a bonus for closing my eyes when I kissed a girl.

About two minutes later I put her down on her feet once more and told her about my mental image when I closed my eyes.

"That," she said, "won't be necessary." She pried open Cedric's palm and, averting her own eyes, she flashed the revealed gem in mine.

"From now and forever, Hugh Seadon, see me as you saw me early this afternoon!" It worked. I made another grab for her, but she evaded me, closed Cedric's hand up again and replaced it on his heaving chest. "What he does not know now he'll never discover from us. Let's get out of here."

Nor has Cedric ever learned our secret. It takes a good deal of restraint to keep my eyes off Sally when the three of us are together, but I manage. We slipped off and got married during one of Cedric's brief sessions with his business associates, and that was probably the most unusual feeling I'll have in a long time.

I have long since gotten used to seeing her like that on the street, in the most formal dining rooms, on the African veldt and even in a Roman Cathedral, but the day we stood up before the minister her Bikini bathing suit almost made me forget to say, "I do."

It was the only time I ever tried mentally to *dress* a lovely woman with my eyes.

THE END

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YOU are thinking at this very moment. But where do you feel this thinking is taking place? Is it in the front of your head or the back? Ah, somewhere just back of the eyes, you say, and a little above them. Don't tell me your thinking seems to occur in a sinus passage! No, close your eyes and it won't seem to focus so much in that unlikely area. Now there isn't any focus at all? Just all over the inside of your head, whatever that means, and even a little in your arm or your heart or whatever spot you happen to concentrate on.

Any spot you happen to concentrate on!

The stream of ideas came to a dead halt right there and Benson walked around the final thought as if absorption of it back into his mind, turning it over and over there, might mean overturning the whole world outside. What a crazy, useless mess to be concocting when humanity already was topsy-turvy, teetering on collapse, and waiting for its best minds to find an answer, any answer, to its real problem.

So he stopped walking around the idea and waited until it faded, leaving behind only a vacuum. Then the horrible truth rose once more in its place.

"Your coffee, sir?" Hubert had slipped so quietly into the library that Benson had not heard the slightest clink of metal or crackle of electronic circuits. The butler was leaning slightly forward now, ready to set the silver service down on the end table next to his master's easy chair. "You did not ring, sir, but you always have coffee at four."

"Thank you, Hubert." He looked intently into the robot's

An ingenious re-examination of the Laws of Robotics, involving a new way for robots to kill people and a new way for people to kill robots.

the THINKING DISEASE

By ALBERT TEICHNER

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face and the two plasti-eyes stared back persistently but without the slightest hint of insolence. This one, at least, remained faithful to his original programming.

Or did he? Benson sipped his coffee (perfectly blended as ever), as he watched the impeccably butler-tailored back retreating to the door. There was no special reason they could not get to Hubert. In fact, it seemed now that there was no reason why they could not get to any of their fellow creatures, no matter what the original programming. Hubert's well-regulated face could be as amenable as ever at the very moment he leaned forward, thumb nail properly tilted to slit his master's throat from ear to ear.

The situation, theoretically impossible, had been speculated upon so long that now, even though actually existent, it seemed like some mere word trick of those ancient fictioneers and metaphysicians who had found their greatest pleasure in toying with the impossible. From Dr. Frankenstein to Norbert Weiner and beyond there had been the idle speculation about man's creations taking over from man. But the proper precautions had always been observed—any robot thinking revolt had lost the capacity for thought itself, a self-regulating cutoff mechanism.

Not so perfect, though, nowadays. For the past two years there had been an increasing number of master-murders without any feedback destruction in the responsible machines. *Because no single robot had conceived the idea of revolt.*

NOW, for the past few months, increasing numbers were abandoning their places of work and congregating in strategically scattered strongholds for guerilla forays, hit and run tactics, against people unaccustomed to physical struggle. Each day the red stains of rebellion inched onward, like overstuffed amoebas, on the telenews maps. Within those darkened, antiseptic zones no cell of life persisted; robots needed neither human slaves nor biological food.

This was the problem to wrestle with, Benson sighed, gazing into the bottom of his coffeecup as if the grains there could spell out an effortless solution for the man who had the key to their chaotic code. It was the problem to which all human beings on Earth and the dependency planets were supposed to be devoting every waking hour. Each being a vast repository of history's cultures, thoroughly self-indoctrinated in every art and science during his centuries of gentle leisure. Someone should have had an answer by now.

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But the only response had been a vast failure of nerve, a desire to make the threat disappear by ignoring its existence. Many had managed to disregard the future by concentrating all their thinking on some obscure aspect of the past, a period of particularly beautiful china glazes or a shift in vertebrate jaw structures. Others had found total relief from the thought of metallic hands crushing fragile necks by drugging themselves with twenty-four hour sessions of mathemusic. And a few, like Benson, had become students of their own private selves, studying each minor movement of the mind from one idle speculation to another.

SHOULD I pour myself a second cup? Benson wondered. *Now, then, the problem is really quite simple—they have developed a collective unconsciousness and this overall mechanism gives each captured robot its instructions, pools their separate knowledge for a common effort. Should I pour myself a second cup? Let's see, where was I? Ah yes! all we have to do is find a way to shortcircuit that collective function the way we can make a single decision-creating machine break down. Broad wavefront beams should do that trick—oh no! that's been tried. Have to figure something else.*

SUDDENLY he felt exhausted by the whole thing and leaned back, relaxing pleasantly and returning to that consoling problem about where a man's thought were. "Would you care for another cup of coffee, sir?" There was Hubert again at his elbow.

"Why yes, that would do very nicely."

Once more the unbreakable nail glinted on Hubert's outthrust thumb as he tilted the silver coffee pot but, this time Benson languidly refused to see menace in it. He waved Hubert away and the butler bowed, then moved silently out of the library.

Now, let's see. My thoughts, when I really concentrate on them, don't seem to be anywhere in particular. Suppose I wanted them to seem to be outside of me?

He concentrated, eyes tightly shut. The vague place of thinking floated until it felt as if it were half within him, half somewhere outside. Then the movement stopped.

After an hour of futile effort he resolved on a new tack. He would aim at a precise point one meter directly ahead of him and see if his thinking could seem to come from it. *Now!* There was a sense of some force straining to be completely beyond him but nothing happened.

Maybe I'm trying too much for a starter.

Benson refocussed on a spot

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ten centimeters straight ahead. All of a sudden some mental point gave way and he was experiencing the most peculiar sensation of his long, long life. The part of him that said *I* was no longer inside; it was floating beyond him, just as instructed! For a few minutes *I* watched the body through which it worked, then slowly slid back into its vague usual home.

Fiddling while Rome burns, his conscience warned. At any other time this would have been a wonderful discovery, good for a few decades of pleasant trifling. Now it could only be part of the dangerous drift into race suicide that was going on everywhere.

So he went right back to toying with and refocussing his *I*. A few more trys and he had managed to move it a full meter out. It was an enjoyable thrill that could grow with practise and the devil with being practical! Some machine somewhere was bound to remain loyal and come up with a solution sooner or later.

AFTER another hour the *I* of his being moved about the library, rising and falling at his command, like some metaphysical bird swimming across the dimensions of its private universe. One moment his body shrank in his inner eye, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope, the next it billowed outward to elephantine proportions. *Whee!* he screamed happily, the sound too loud and too high to be produced by vocal cords. *I* zoomed from one end of the library to the other, then swooped a curlicue passage back to the ceiling corner from which it had taken off.

His chubby body rested below him like an object from another galaxy. It moved slowly to the soft pulsing of breath and blood but everything else in the library was perfectly still. . . .

Until the door opened and, looking equally diminished and faraway, Hubert glided noiselessly back into the library. He was moving quickly across the room but with no evident purpose except to see his master at closer range. Then the mechanical hand slowly rose and, like a jackknife springing from its place of concealment, the thumb nail flicked into place.

Horrified, Benson watched his death approaching as if seeing the action in the slowest motion possible without all illusion of movement ending. Suddenly, though, he could no longer remain passive—would there be any place left for *I* to go to if his body died? *That* was one experiment no one alive could risk.

Frantically he refocussed to come to closest grips with the rebellious robot, to be *inside* the very heart of danger. He swooped

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again and he really was there! The next thing he knew body and mind were one again and he was rising from his seat, staring at the crumpled metal figure. His foot cautiously shoved against Hubert's torso, increasing the pressure until the robot fell with a clatter over onto its back. Two melted eyes blankly rested in a contorted face. The whole cunning mechanism had collapsed into junk.

Why? Benson unscrewed the neckplate and peered inside. There, too, organs had fused into dead metal and the precisely frozen cryotron box had melted, its vast information store destroyed.

HE SAT down again, his being invigorated by the narrow escape from death. *Why,* he kept asking himself, *why has this happened?* But, alive as his mind now was, it could find no answer.

Ordinarily he would have just sat there four or five hours, savoring the chance to speculate to no purpose. This time, though, he managed to sustain a will to act and set the televiewer for Dr. Larkin's apartment thirty stories above him.

There was no answer. It didn't seem likely that Larkin would be away from his apartment—people went out as little as possible these turbulent days. Anyway, as one of the greatest living cybernetic ians, Larkin was supposed to be staying at home, thinking intensively about the collective menace. Either he had fallen victim to an attack or—.

Desperately, Benson turned on the Emergency Demand circuit, hoping it had not been tampered with. The viewers in Larkins place all went on. The third screen on Benson's console showed the scientist deep in an escapist fugue, staring at a color symphony. Benson pressed for maximum sound until Larkin was shaken from his intellectual narcosis. "All right, all right," he grumbled, coming toward his own televiewer. "Can't a man even have a little privacy in his own home?"

"Come to my place," Benson shouted. "One hundred and fifty B."

That brought the lean, bitter face completely awake. "Are you crazy, Benson? That is Benson, isn't it?" He peered a while, then nodded. "I've got work to do here. Anyway, it's dangerous to go out in the corridors."

"You've got to risk it."

"Oh, sure, just like that!"

"Look and listen." He turned his camera on Hubert's corpse and repeated everything that had happened in the past few hours. The scientist said nothing but became increasingly agitated as the story went on. "Larkin, don't you believe me? I tell you it happened just that way—only I

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don't know *what* happened."

"I'll be there, I'll be there right away." His skinny hands clutched pleadingly toward Benson. "Don't move out of your place whatever you do. Don't open the door for anyone and when I come on your entry plate let me in right away. Maybe there is some hope after all!"

"What's all this sudden rush about? I didn't mean you had to hurry this much."

LARKIN was too excited to bother turning his set off. He was already half way out the room when he shouted over his shoulder. "Maybe it's nothing but they can't be sure either. You may be the worst danger they've hit yet—they probably know already what's happened and they can't let you live if I'm right!"

"I'm not that special," Benson insisted. "I'm sure any human being would have done what I did. I—." But Larkin was already gone.

It would be three or four minutes at most before the older man would reach him but he began to count each second nervously. Suppose Larkin was right? Suppose the collective robot mind would really be working to get him now? Wouldn't that mechanical subconsciousness also be out for Larkin's blood too?

He pictured the spindly fellow being attacked as he rushed into the corridor, then saw him cut down as he went down a bend in the hall, metal madmen springing at him from behind every bush of the hall gardens, then imagined him slashed from behind while waiting for the elevator. *Could I project that far?* he wondered. *Could I really help him?*

Even if it were possible, it would be a terrible gamble, letting the *I* go so far away and leaving the body unprotected. If Larkin were right, *he* was the one who possessed the power of knowledge that had to be saved at any price.

The seconds went by more slowly. Then there was a gap between two of them so interminable that he had to take the chance. Benson focussed every weightless ounce of mental force on the corridor outside Larkin's place and, with a strength born of desperate need, the *I* broke immediately from him, then, like a quantum leap, was at its destination without being anywhere between.

There was Larkin pacing anxiously by the elevator door. Down the long green corridor Benson saw a huge Servile, designed for the coarsest heavy labor, emerge from an apartment and start to lumber menacingly toward the elevator where the dial showed the car was still thirty floors away. Then Larkin, eyes widening with fear and suddenly-re-

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turning defeat, saw the hulking thing approaching too.

Benson lunged toward the Servile and the thing hesitated as if functioning with new-found sophistication of awareness. Finally it turned tail and headed back into the apartment from which it had came.

Larkin leaped into the elevator as soon as the door started to slide open and Benson followed him in. He rode down with the trembling man and accompanied him to the door of 150B. Then he returned to his body and opened the door.

"GHASTLY close thing!" Larkin exclaimed, rushing inside and slamming the great door shut. "A Servile came down the corridor toward me—.

"—and then turned tail and went back to the place from which it had emerged."

"How did you know that?"

"I was there."

Shaking, Larkin eased himself into a chair. "Give me a little time to take this in. I feel like everybody else—licked and almost not caring anyway—but this makes a little difference. Look, do you think you could teach me how to do it?"

"You can teach yourself, just a matter of concentration."

"If we could destroy enough individual robots their collective mind would disappear." He rhythmically thumped a row of knuckles into a bony palm.

"Disappear?"

"Absolutely." He leaned forward. "Nobody's ever going to understand what mind really is but we have figured this much out about the robot collective. It did not exist when there were fewer thinking machines. But we made too many that make other thinking machines. At some critical point a few years ago there were suddenly enough of them for another, higher level of mechanically-based mind to emerge. It's like the bombs of the ancients —they didn't explode until a certain critical mass was achieved. If we can destroy enough robots without their striking back effectively their numbers will recede below the critical point and that will be that!"

"But they *can* cope effectively."

"Not necessarily. This emerging thing is still new, feeling its way into full being. If we wait much longer, of course, we'll be *completely* powerless. If—everything's if!—if I could grasp the principle behind what you have been doing we'd have a real weapon."

"You're not going to get a deep insight, not even with all your knowledge, unless you yourself try to project."

"Then let's start right away! But first—you'd better check the corridors."

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"Right." Benson focused again and this time the *I* moved away as easily as if the body had never been its restraining home. It moved out into the corridors and saw one block away down a straight hall three enormous Serviles approaching, the floor buckling beneath their tread. They all carried blasters.

Benson concentrated more intensely than ever and passed from one to the other, each movement of his will ending in a tiny moment of blackout. Soon the three of them lay dead on the buckling floor.

AFTER that he sped through each floor, passing human masters, bloodily gored in their easy chairs, and other places where the butlers still moved obeisantly to their tired masters' commands. In a few apartments where death seemed to be at hand he intervened to destroy the threatening machine. Then he returned to his own place and felt Larkin's skinny fingers clutching at his elbow. "It's all right now," Benson smiled. "We can begin."

Larkin proved to be a difficult pupil and hour after hour he tried with little success to disentangle mind from body. "I can feel something *almost* happening," he said finally, "but it doesn't. I'm not an introspective like you. We'd better get somebody who can pick this up right."

"You *can* do it, Larkin. Otherwise why do you almost get through? You *have* to. You've got the training to profit by the experience even if it takes much longer for you to get there."

"All right," he sighed, "but it's sheer murder." He returned to concentrating on the problem and still nothing happened.

Then, in a split second, he went limp. A minute later his eyes opened and he was smiling. "It happened! I was outside myself and I could move a little there."

"No time for talk," Benson insisted. "Back to work."

An hour later Larkin was more adept at it. "Now," he said, "I'm going to try to get into *your* body."

"No, that's too dangerous!"

"So is trying nothing."

He closed his eyes and suddenly Benson started to shake as if about to collapse. Something was trying to take over within him and in another second he would no longer exist. Instinctively he fought back against the invading factor and it pulled away.

Sweat was pouring over his back as he watched the older man come to. Larkin shook his head in wonder and smiled. "I *know!*" he said. "I'm sure of it."

"You know you could have killed me!"

"No. Any human soul would

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fight off such a threat. But the robot is not *that* sophisticated in its structure. No robot will ever be able to hold it back."

"But *what* is it?"

"Wait until I finish." Larkin took a pencil and started scribbling calculations on some sheets of paper. After a while he looked up. "There's the answer. We should be able to train all men to do it, maybe even design machines."

BENSON was trying to unravel the esoteric calculations. "They've already tried broad wave interference. It doesn't work?"

"Not broad wave, young man, but a very specific one, that's what's needed. When the attacking wave's broad the harmonics cancel out the potentially dangerous factor. Every advanced decision-maker, whether biological or mechanical, functions on the basis of a whole series of carrier waves."

"You mean that my free-floating psyche has been fouling up these robots with an alien alpha?"

"Of course not. Alpha waves, betas and the rest that were the first to be discovered at the dawn of EEG, they couldn't be upset by telepathic superimposition—each receiving brain is so unique in those rhythms that it never even gets to grapple with intruders. I'm thinking of the Tau component that is *always* present as a harmonic in every thought process."

"*Tau* waves? Larkin, that's the one thought wave that's the same for everyone, animal or machine—everyone. How could the imposition of my Tau on another brain's Tau make any difference?"

"That's the beauty of the thing. It's the same and it isn't the same!

"I'm not trying to make a paradox game. The Tau waves are the same because our most delicate mechanisms show them to be. They are not the same because no two things in the universe can be exactly alike. In this case we're dealing with a variation so close to the heart of mental reality that it must remain beyond our instrumental grasp. See what I'm driving at?"

Benson stared at the scrawled sheets. "The invading Tau wave is so much like that of the host mind's that it can come to grips with that mind but it is still sufficiently—if imperceptibly—different to disturb the harmonic unity of that host. And from this tiny alien tremor the frequency shifts ripple outward until the whole psychic function is shattered and along with it the physical seat of that function."

"Which is why the human race is back in business!" **THE END**

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Wouldn't you think a beat joint was the last place to find an ancient alien horror? But through the smoke, the gin and jazz, terror heralded the unutterable shining of . . .

THE HUNGRY EYE

By ROBERT BLOCH

THERE'S an old Chicago saying which covers it—if you stand on the corner of State and Madison Street long enough, you'll see everyone you know in the world pass by. A seeming exaggeration, but that's what they say.

I'd been in Chicago for quite a while now, but I'd never put the matter to a test, and I had no intention of trying it today. As far as that goes, I wasn't even standing on the corner; I was halfway down the block, making for the subway entrance, but that's when I saw him. Just a flash of the profile, with the broken nose unmistakably outlined against a store-window—yet even after five years it was enough for instantaneous recognition. One doesn't forget the face of an only brother, though heaven knows I'd tried during the years apart.

For a moment I was tempted to go on without speaking. But there was something about the way he hurried along, head bent, which triggered a response. Before I knew it, the words were out of my mouth.

"George," I called. "George, it's me."

I could swear to the look of panic on his face, and it wasn't that he was horrified by my grammar, either. He turned, stared, recognized me, and put his hand to his mouth. And then he ran. He ran down State Street like a man possessed.

Of course that isn't the way I described his actions to myself at the time. Nobody uses phrases like "a man possess-

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ed" any more. "Possessed" by *what?* There are no demons in the Twentieth Century, we all realize that. There are no demons, no devils, no evil spirits. We live in an enlightened age, in a sane, matter-of-fact world of gas chambers, human incineration plants, wholesale massacres, scientific torture-devices and hydrogen bombs. But everything has a perfectly logical explanation, and no man's cruelty or inhumanity to his fellows is based on demoniac possession. There is no place in this modern world for ogres or bogey-men. We are well aware that we deal with nothing more alarming than sadists, psychopaths, paranoiacs, schizophrenics, manic - depressives, necrophiles, zooerasts, pyromaniacs and other deviates and border-line neurotics whose combined total is probably less than one-third of the entire population.

So my brother George, whatever his problem, was obviously not "possessed." He was just, in popular parlance, a weirdo. And if he ran off that way it was because he was merely sick, sick, sick.

"Sick, sick, sick." For a moment I thought of following him, but the press of the crowd was too great. Besides, why *should* I bother? I hadn't seen the man for over five years, and when he'd left then I'd been glad to be rid of him. It was obvious, whatever his present problem might be, that he didn't want to see me now. I was surprised to run across him in Chicago—we'd parted in Boston. Chances were, in a city area of four million, that I wouldn't encounter him again; if he wanted to seek me out, he could do so easily enough. He'd find my name in the papers, in the little ads on the amusement page. Let him come down to the Club and watch my act.

No sense in worrying about him and his troubles, not right now. Better to think about that "sick, sick, sick" business. Maybe I ought to work up some more bits for the act.

I was doing a stand-up routine at the Club every night. The Club was on North Clark, just a sucker-trap like hundreds of other joints all over the country, and my routine was like hundreds of other acts. The Mort Sahl scene, dig? Every week you read *The Reporter* magazine and then you make with the memorized ad-libs about the squares and all like that there. You've got Nixon jokes

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and Sputnik jokes and General Motors jokes and progressive jazz jokes and Zsa Zsa Gabor jokes and G.I. jokes and Eisenhower golf jokes and Togetherness jokes and sports-car jokes and addict jokes and television jokes and if the crowd is hip you even have a few Zen jokes. Just the old off-Beatnik routine, but that's what they're going for this season. And most of all, of course, you have sick jokes. The time is long gone when Will Rogers could get up and milk laughs by talking about visiting Congress. Today every comic talks about visiting his psychiatrist.

Actually, I'd never visited a headshrinker, but maybe I should have. Because I hated this routine of mine. And I hated the audience—the oh-so-sophisticated, oh-so-selfconscious, self-assured, nervous, nonconformist in-group of enlightened, superior free souls enchained in the irresponsible necessity of satisfying their own selfish desires. Said desires being to drink, dope and debauch while avoiding any consequences of their actions; in a word, the same desires which might conceivably be found in a gang of truck-drivers. The only difference being in favor of the truck-drivers; they at least gratified them without rationalizations. They didn't expect anyone to write books proclaiming that their antisocial activities were really the spiritual expression of an inner sensitivity searching for the truth. If a truck-driver got drunk and picked up a girl and sponged off her and then deserted her on the road, that was that. But a Beatnik, or the thousands upon thousands of pseudo-Beatniks who hid behind beards these days, insisted that he was On *the* Road. And he liked to do his drinking and make his pick-ups and get his kicks, man, in crummy joints featuring comics such as myself—who flattered his stunted ego by making funnies about squares.

Oh, I hated it, and no mistake. But it was a living. I got two bills a week out of it, and besides now I had Lucy.

We'd been married a little over four months now, and lived in an apartment not far from the Club. Yes, it was an apartment, an old-fashioned apartment with Kroehler furniture and there were Audobon print reproductions on the walls. It wasn't a "pad" where you sat on the floor and played bongos, ducking your head whenever you stood up so that you wouldn't

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be brained by the sharp edges of one of those damned mobiles.

Lucy was no Beatnik type, and that's why I loved her. She had been taking post-grad work at U. of C. when I met her, and she had a job in a law office in the Loop now; when she came home she cooked dinner in an apron instead of hopping around opening a can of beans while wearing a dirty leotard.

Right now I was anxious to get home to her. Riding the subway I gradually forgot about brother George. He was one of *them,* one of the Beatniks. Of course, he'd been born a few years too early to call himself a member of the Beat Generation. He wasn't lucky enough to be around when the self-justification labels were passed out. In *his* time, people like George were identified, quite simply, as selfish and untrustworthy. If they lied and stole and cheated and ran up bad debts and goofed off on jobs and beat it out of town when some girl's parents raised a stink, they acquired bad reputations. And if you loved them, you tried to help them. You did your best to pull them out of jams and you did your best to talk a little sense into them, and then when nothing seemed to work, you heaved a sigh of mingled regret and relief when they finally took off for good.

I had. And I heaved another sigh now and turned my thoughts to Lucy. She'd be home now, waiting for me.

And she was. She came into my arms, there at the door, and I forgot everything; the stupid moralizing and self-righteousness and the worries beneath them. There was only this warmth and this richness and this response. Until she stepped back and handed me the newspaper.

"Here, darling," she said. "Read this."

This was a single-column story on the front page, and my eyes moved over it hastily. It was Lucy's habit to call my attention to items in the paper which might inspire a gag or two for my act, but I wasn't getting any particular sparks from this one.

A murder had been committed this morning in the basement of the old Harvey residence, out on the South Side. The late Chandler Harvey was a well-to-do collector of oriental art who had willed his acquisitions to the Chicago Art Institute. Upon being notified of the settlement of the estate, the Institute had

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dispatched two guards to catalogue and pack the collection under the supervision of orientologist Wilmer Shotwell. While waiting for Shotwell's arrival, the two men had entered the basement of the Harvey home where the collection was assembled. It was here, at approximately 12:15 P.M. that Shotwell discovered the body of one of them, Raymond Brice, 41, of 2319 Sunview Avenue. He had apparently been killed by a blow on the head from a heavy stone figurine. Police were seeking the other guard, George Larson, 33, of—

My brother, George.

Lucy stared at me. "Then I was right," she murmured.

"Yes."

"Of course, that's not such an unusual name. It could be another George Larson."

I sighed. "It could be. But it isn't."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Because I saw him, less than an hour ago. He was downtown, on State Street, and when I recognized him and called out, he ran."

"Oh, Dave, what are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "What *can* I do? I don't know where he is now—certainly not at that fleabag hotel address listed in the paper. Maybe he got out of town. I hope so."

"In spite of all he did to you?" I'd told Lucy about George, of course.

"Yes. That's gone and forgotten. Besides, I'm not sure he's guilty."

"But the paper says—"

"I know what the paper says, and what the police say. They find a body, George is gone, and they jump to conclusions. But George is my brother. I know him pretty well. He's a bum and a moocher, and I wouldn't trust him with a wallet or a woman. But I don't buy him as a murderer—he hasn't got it in him to kill. There's no violence in George."

"How do you know?" Lucy put her hands on my shoulders. "How do you know what it takes to make a killer?"

"I don't really. It's just that I can't imagine George pulling a stunt like that."

"You're really fond of him, aren't you, in spite of everything?"

I crumpled the newspaper. "Damn it, if he'd only stopped when I called him, let me help him!"

"You're upset," Lucy said. "Maybe you ought to call the Club, tell them you can't appear tonight."

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I shook my head. "What good would that do? Until we get more facts, we might as well forget about it. We aren't listed in the phonebook yet so there's no chance of George seeking us out here. And I doubt if the police or anyone else knows that he's my brother. So you go ahead to your evening class, and I'll go to the Club. To coin an expression, the show must go on."

And it went on, at the Club, around ten. I was standing there holding the floor-mike when I saw George come in. He was still wearing the same suit he'd worn downtown during the afternoon, but his collar was open and his tie was gone. His hair hung over his forehead. He was drunk.

No, it wasn't the open collar and fallen hair bit that made me so certain. It was the way he slumped down at a deuce-table in the far corner and started talking to this pink panda.

That's right; he carried a pink panda, the kind you win at an amusement park. The kind *you* win, perhaps, but not I. I wouldn't be caught dead at an amusement park. And maybe that had been George's idea. He didn't want to be caught, dead or alive, and what better way to disappear than in the midst of a crowd? But he was still nervous, and he started to drink, and when he got enough liquor under his belt he realized he needed help. So he remembered seeing my name in the Club ads and he came here, to me.

And I came to him, as soon as I'd cut the show. Came to the corner where he sat mumbling to this damned pink panda. An idiotic thing to do —or was it? He looked like just another drunk and perhaps it was a clever move, using a pink panda for protective coloration. One thing I had to give George; drunk or sober, he was always clever, I could vouch for that.

Only he didn't look clever now. He looked scared.

"Davie-boy! It's good to see you."

I sat down. "You didn't think so this afternoon, on State Street."

"I was in a hurry."

"I know. I read the papers."

"But you don't understand—"

"Damned right I don't."

"I've got to talk to you, alone. Dave, there's something I've got to tell you, I'm going to need your help. I've never been in a spot like this before."

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"You're talking about the guard?"

He glanced around, then bent forward. "No, it isn't that. The guard's not important. There's something else. Something worse. Something—"

"Hold it," I said. "We can't talk here, and I won't be able to leave now. I cut the last show at twelve; after that the band takes over for the late crowd. Stick around until then and we'll go somewhere together."

"But I can't wait that long." He grabbed my arm. "Dave, I mustn't be alone. Don't you see? Unless I talk to somebody pretty soon I'll flip—"

"Talk to your friend here," I said, poking my finger at the pink panda. "Have another drink. But wait here. I'll get back as soon as possible."

His eyes went blank, as blank as the brown buttons in the panda's head. And he stared at the ridiculous doll, stared at it long after I left the table. He hadn't lied; he was ready to flip. To snap his cap, climb the walls, or whatever phrase you choose to disguise the grim reality. There are so many charming, picturesque little phrases dealing with that subject today—because there are so many charming, picturesque cases of acute psychosis.

But then I was up in front of the mike again, talking about psychosis myself, talking about Flipville and stopping in at your friendly neighborhood analyst, three couches—no waiting. And the crowd loved it. They loved it because they could all pretend they were laughing at the other fellow; *they* were all right. Sure they were all right—the chronic lushes, the double-gaited ones and the lizzies and the barroom brawlers and the girls on tea and the boys on horse. They were intellectuals, they were iconoclasts, they were artists. In order to be truly creative, in order to dig Life the most, you had to get your kicks.

Like Sarah, for example.

I saw her out of the corner of my eye, coming in from the bar. Big Sarah, in the toreador pants and the sweatshirt; both garments bulging in all the right places. That was the story of Sarah's life—she was always bulging in the right places. She wore dangling copper earrings to match the color of her hair, and I had no doubt but that she'd made them herself. Because Sarah was an artist and she enjoyed making things. Including ugly

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scenes and handsome men. Sometimes, when she was a little high, even the men could be ugly. I knew quite a bit about Sarah, because she was one of the regulars at the Club. She was one of those who laughed the loudest at all the sick jokes, but I happened to know she'd spent some time on the psychiatrist's couch herself—and quit only when she couldn't persuade him to join her there.

But Sarah was an artist and she had an artist's eye. Right now it might be a trifle bloodshot, but it seemed to have spotted that pink panda. Because as I watched, she wandered over to my brother George and started talking. By the time I'd finished the routine I was on, she'd sat down next to him. During the course of my next bit the waitress came over with drinks. Sarah was giving him the big treatment now.

Well, maybe it was all for the best. At least she'd keep George company until I could join him again. She knew how to laugh it up, and that was just what he needed now to last out the evening. But I wished both of them were a bit more sober. The waitress was already back at the table with more drinks—doubles, this time.

I wanted to trim my act, but the crowd was with me and off to one side I could see Paul, the booker. He was grinning and I grinned back. I needed Paul. He was the guy who could pull me out of this trap—get me a better spot, maybe even downtown. So this was no time to beg off. I had to keep going.

But Sarah and George kept going, too. I watched the waitress approach again. They were toasting the panda, now. Sarah held it on her lap. She said something to George and laughed.

Then the crowd was laughing, and I went into my finale. The TV commercial business, and the horror movie jazz. That's the big sophisticated boffola, you know—kidding the horror movies. Only to make it really sharp, you throw in a few references to *The Lonely Crowd* and *Lolita.*

I bowed off.

I bowed off and started for George's table—or what had been George's table. But George was gone now. He, and Sarah and the pink panda had vanished. It didn't take a correspondence-course in detective work to figure out where they must be. Sarah had a studio down the street. Just the place for a *menage a*

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trois. Maybe she was queer for pandas.

If I could have left then, I'd have made it my business to find out. But I couldn't leave; there was another show to do in just forty minutes. The last show. After that I could go. George would still be there, if Sarah had her way. And she generally did. George was in no shape to offer much resistance.

Perhaps it was for the best; at least he'd be out of public scrutiny. But I wasn't, not until the final show was over. And in order to prepare for it, I needed a drink.

I stepped over to the bar, looking around for Paul. The booker was standing down at the end, near the door, talking to a tall, gray-haired man who had just come in. I nodded at him and he nodded back. Then he turned to his companion and said something. I thought he'd break away, and was surprised to see that the gray-haired man moved in my direction instead. He paused behind me.

"Mr. Larson—"

"Yes?"

"I am Dr. Shotwell."

Shotwell. Where had I heard that name before? Then I remembered — the newspaper story. Wilmer Shotwell, the orientologist in charge of the Harvey collection. My brother and the other guard had been waiting for him when the murder occurred. So he must know George. And he'd found me. Did he realize George had been here? Had Paul noticed me talking to him?

I'd have to gamble on that. In a case like this, attack is usually the best defense. So I turned to Shotwell and nodded.

"Yes, I read your name in the news story tonight. Have you found my brother yet?"

"I was hoping you'd give me an answer to the same question, Mr. Larson."

"My brother and I have been out of touch with one another for the past five years. It wasn't until today that I knew he was in Chicago." I paused, but not long enough for him to ask any questions. Instead, I shot one at him. "How did you know he was my brother?"

"I did some checking. It seems he gave your name as a reference when he applied for the position of temporary guard at the Institute several months ago."

If Shotwell had checked, that meant the police would check too. Maybe it was just as well that George had gone

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off with Sarah. I'd avoid a lot of explanations this way.

"He never informed me about this," I said. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"That isn't the reason I'm here," Dr. Shotwell answered. "I wanted to warn you."

"About George? He isn't dangerous. In fact, no matter what the newspapers say, I can't believe he killed that man."

"I can. And it's quite likely that he will kill again."

"But why? Just because he may have had a fight with his fellow-guard and struck him in a moment of rage—"

Dr. Shotwell shook his head. "That's what the police believe. I know they are wrong, but I made no effort to correct them. It's better that they aren't aware of the facts."

"Which are—?"

"Mr. Larson, I knew the late Chandler Harvey very well. He was an insatiable collector of *objets d' art* and *curiosa*. He bought at auctions, he bought from dealers, he purchased through agents, he spent a fortune acquiring rarities. As an orientologist I helped catalogue only a small part of his treasure-trove; for that's what it was, what it came to represent in his own mind. Collecting can become a form of monomania, you know, particularly in the case of a wealthy man who reaches the point where he doesn't even know what he has obtained any more. This was certainly true in Harvey's situation. He literally did not know the extent of his own possessions. Pottery, sculptures, *bas-reliefs*, jewels from all over the world and out of it."

"Out of it?"

Shotwell leaned forward. "Do you know anything about meteorites?"

"A little."

"Well, I needn't lecture. Let's just say that I have reason to believe that there are many strange, as yet unclassified phenomena concerning these particles from outer space. There are australites, for example, which seem to fall recurrently in certain areas of the Earth's surface, almost as though they were sent. Or if they were seeking—"

"Seeking? You talk as if they were alive."

"Is it so impossible to believe that there are other life forms besides the animal and the vegetable in the universe? Is mineral life so alien a concept? What *is* the difference between life and existence?

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What laws govern its patterns? How can we recognize life when we see it? There are living creatures whose skeletons grow outside their bodies, there is the mystery of reincarnation and metamorphosis leading from larva to butterfly. What causes the regeneration of a fingernail, how do you explain the growth of a single hair on your own body, what is the common denominator of a blade of grass and a Giant Redwood?" Shotwell paused and smiled self-consciously. "But I said I wouldn't deliver a lecture, didn't I? And I won't. All I must tell you is that I think amongst Chandler Harvey's collection of rarities was an unusual meteorite—an ancient, jewel-like object which, in a certain sense, is alive. And I believe your brother must have found it today."

"Are you trying to tell me he mistook it for a jewel, was caught trying to steal it by the other guard, and killed him?"

"Perhaps."

"Then why come to me? Why not inform the police?"

"Because they wouldn't believe me. And they wouldn't take the proper precautions with the meteorite if they recovered it."

"Precautions?"

Shotwell sighed. "Have you heard about precious stones which seemed to carry a curse, to bring death and violence to their owners or whoever came in prolonged contact with them? Have you any knowledge of temple idols before whose jewelled eyes a bloody sacrifice is made? Have you ever wondered why certain infamous mass-murderers carried so-called 'lucky stones' upon their persons?"

I stared at him. "You mean to say you believe this meteorite possesses some intelligence which influences men to kill? But why?"

"Some living entities subsist on air, some on sunlight, some on flesh. Some require water—and some need blood." Shotwell grimaced. "I don't know very much, really. I have been able to trace this particular fragment back a mere fifty years. At that time it appeared in St. Petersburg, as the property of one Gregorovitch, the Little Gray Brother. History knows him as Rasputin. The meteorite had already been artificially faceted and polished then, but it may not have been when he acquired it, during his years of exile in Siberia. There have been great recurrent meteor showers in that area, you know. It is said that Ras-

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putin used various jewels as hypnotic agents—"

I stood up. "Really, Dr. Shotwell, I don't see what you have to gain by all this."

"It's not a question of gain. I have only one purpose in seeing you. If your brother seeks you out, try and secure that meteorite. Don't turn it over to the authorities; notify me immediately. Here is my card."

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder. It was Lew Kirby, the leader of the combo at the Club. "Two minutes 'til showtime, Pops," he said. I nodded at him.

"Got to run along now," I told Shotwell. "You heard the man."

"Yes, but if anything happens—"

"Okay. I'll get in touch with you." And I moved away. The old brushoff. That's the only way to handle the weirdos, and Shotwell was a weirdo from way back. I only wished he'd stayed there. Him and his living meteorites and out-of-this-world life forms.

The trouble was, he hadn't stayed there, in his own little private world of fantasy. And I couldn't brush off what he'd told me. Even though he went right out, and I went right on to do the act, the whole crazy business kept nagging at me.

What was he *really* trying to say? That strange entities may exist in outer space and occasionally succeed in reaching Earth—that they need blood for nourishment and influence men to provide it—that such an entity became a part of the Harvey collection—that my brother stumbled across it today and killed a guard and stole it.

None of this made any sense. Besides, George hadn't really shed any blood; he'd conked that other guard on the head with a statue and run off. More likely this thing was a jewel, he'd seen it and gotten a case of sticky fingers, the guard saw him put the snatch on it and interfered, and George panicked and let him have it with the stone figurine. In which case perhaps Shotwell was spinning this wild yarn deliberately. He knew I'd never repeat such nonsense to anyone else, but at the same time he was giving me the message. George had a jewel, and Shotwell probably wanted it for himself. I was supposed to play stooge; get the thing away from George and give it to Shotwell. No wonder he hadn't hollered copper—if the jewel was valuable, but no

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one else knew it had been in the collection, he could latch onto it for keeps.

That made a lot more sense to me. That's the kind of thing which *could* happen in my little world—the world of the Club, where everybody is out for just two things; loot and kicks. And there are no mysteries, only the psychoses and neuroses which arise when people are thwarted in their search for loot and kicks.

Well, right now they were spending their loot at the little tables so that I'd stand up there and provide them with a few vicarious kicks. So I did. I gave them my monologue, gave them the hip line of you-and-I-know-all-the-answers patter, with every gag reassuring them by inference that they were smart and sure and superior in a world of stupid conformists.

Oh, it was all so simple! The squares looked down on the Beatniks and the Beatniks looked down on the squares, and I looked down on them all because I was really kidding them both, I had the real message. By keeping one foot in either world I was free of both. And there were no *other* worlds.

That was the only trouble. There were no *other* worlds, no worlds where this business of George and the meteorite fitted in. He *had* killed somebody, but why? George wasn't a murderer. He was my brother and he was in a jam, stolen jewel or no. Right now he was drunk, and shacked up with the whackiest nympho I'd ever seen. And pretty soon the cops would do what Shotwell had done; they'd find me, and start asking questions. If George happened to wander back while they were around, or when I had some law tailing me, it would be curtains.

And it *was* curtains, finally, for the act. I bowed off and begged off, and headed out of the Club. I knew where I was going now, where I had to go. Sarah's studio was just down the street. I'd find George, give him the word. Ask him to set me straight on this whole mess. If he was still looped, I'd see that he sobered up, got in shape to travel. But above all, I must get him out of there, get him away from that man-eating female whose artistic efforts extended to canvas and mattress alike. And if she gave me any trouble—

But she didn't give me any trouble.

The downstairs hallway was open, as it always was,

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day or night. And the light, as usual, was burned out in the stairwell. On the fourth landing I could see the dim illumination seeping from under the studio door. That door was never locked, either.

I suppose I could have knocked. It would have been the gentlemanly thing to do, under the circumstances. Right now, though, the circumstances were such as to make me forget I was a gentleman.

The circumstances were that it was past midnight, and the hallway was dark, and I was afraid when I came creeping up those stairs. I was afraid because here in the dark it was so hard to remember about fantasies and hallucinations and affects and all the learned labels by which we seek to explain and expunge our secret dreads. And it was so easy to accept the atavistic memory and menace of myth—of alien life burrowing upwards from inner Earth or swooping down from outer stars, of life that feeds upon us, fastens upon us to eat and drink with myriad, monstrous mouths—

So I didn't knock. I walked right into the studio. And Sarah didn't give me any trouble. She just stood there in front of the big easel and continued painting.

She had been painting for some little time now, apparently, and I doubt if she even realized I was in the room. I doubt if she realized anyone was in the room. Perhaps she might *never* realize the presence of another person again. No, it wasn't that she was drunk and it wasn't that she was in a state of shock. Her movements were the rigid and jerky ones of incipient catatonia (how easily the phrase comes, and how little it really *explains!*) and her eyes were fixed in glassy concentration upon the canvas.

She was painting the pink panda, of course, but she hadn't bothered to use it as a direct model. Her panda was huge, a hastily blocked-in figure covering the entire area of her canvas, and its outlines were grotesquely distorted. It wasn't cubism or surrealism or anything abstract. She'd merely added and altered, so that the panda was now a misshapen monster with a single, blazing eye; a grotesque mutant spawned of a teddy-bear and a Cyclops. And it was no longer a *pink* panda. It was red, and it was ropy, and thick globs of pigment had already congealed in dark masses.

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Occasionally she bent forward to the sofa beside her to dip her brushes, and I glanced at her palette.

Her palette was the body of my brother George, who lay sprawled out on the couch, his limp arms still hugging the pink panda to his breast. From breast to crotch he'd been ripped completely open by her palette-knife, and she was dipping her brush in his wound, dipping her brush in blood and entrails as she painted her monster from life. From *his* life—

I could have screamed. I could have screamed, and struck her, and run for help. Except that now I knew there was no help. George was dead, and she was possessed. Not psychotic, but possessed. Driven, compelled to do what she must do; shocked beyond sanity by killing him, the subconscious rationalization merged with catharsis and she returned to her art. She was atoning for the crime by painting a symbolic portrait of the criminal.

So I made no outcry, because I realized now that what Shotwell had hinted must be true. *There are more things in Heaven and Earth—*

There are more things coming *to Earth,* out of Heaven or some inconceivable alien hell. George had stumbled across one of them, and killed. He brought it to her, and she killed in turn. And it would go on, and on, unless I acted in time.

I acted. I walked over to the corpse and took the pink panda in my arms. She didn't hear me, didn't see me. She was painting the creature's mouth now. The hungry mouth that gaped beneath the stare of the hungry eye.

I picked up the panda and then I turned and ran out of the studio. The stairs thumped beneath me, and the panda thumped against my chest. It thumped and thumped, I could hear it, feel it throbbing there all the way home. There wasn't far to go. It was quite late, now, and the streets were deserted. Anything can happen in deserted streets at night, you know, even in a great city. A vampire can poke his head out of a manhole. A bloated corpse can rise from the fog-wreathed water of the river. A shower of blazing life can fall from the outer stars—

And a pink panda, a silly pink panda from an amusement park, can sound its hideous heartbeat like a devil's drum.

I could only hope that Lucy

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wouldn't hear it when I let myself into the apartment. I could only hope that she would be asleep by now, long home from her evening class and too weary to wait up for me. She usually went to bed without waiting. I prayed she had tonight. Then I could call Shotwell and wait for him to arrive. Maybe I could even give him what he wanted without Lucy knowing. It would be best if she didn't know, if she'd never know.

Luck was with me.

Lucy had retired, leaving the light on in the kitchen. She'd eaten a snack before going to bed, and the leftovers of her midnight lunch were still on the table. I pushed the plate and cup and silverware aside and put the pink panda down.

Now that I wasn't holding it close any longer, I wasn't conscious of the thumping. It was just a toy once more; a foolish, harmless toy. And that, of course, was all it had ever been. There was no malignity about it, no cyclopean essence. George had won it at the amusement park and carried it along with him as a drunken whim. One ear was a bit battered, and the side of the head was torn—

Torn? It had been *cut.*

George had cut it, and not because of intoxicated impulse. He'd cut it and carried it along with him, and no wonder it thumped, because the meteorite was inside. That's where he'd hidden it away. And he'd carried it to the studio and Sarah was aware of it, and then—

Then, *what?*

Had it happened the way Shotwell said it happened? Had the mere presence of the stone been enough to influence a susceptible, already unbalanced psyche?

I didn't know. I didn't care. The one thing now was to get out Shotwell's card, call him, let him come over and take the damned thing away. The damned thing that had already been linked with two deaths today alone, and God knows how many more through the years. *If* Shotwell wasn't as crazy as the rest. As crazy as Sarah was, as crazy as George had been.

But George *wasn't* crazy. And I wasn't, either. There are no monsters. A meteorite is just a piece of metal. It can be stuffed into the soft skull of a fuzzy pink panda, and it can be drawn out very easily.

You can feel it in your hand, because it throbs. It isn't cold and it isn't warm—it just *pulses.* It pulses there

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in your open palm and you stare down at it.

And it stares back.

It stares back, because it's an eye.

What had Shotwell said—that sometime, somewhere, somebody had faceted and polished it until it resembled a jewel? He had been wrong. It hadn't been artificially cut at all, and it didn't resemble a jewel. It resembled an eye. It *was* an eye.

You *could* find such an eye in the forehead of an ancient idol. And you could easily imagine it set in the head of a Cyclops. But staring at it now, I didn't have to imagine anything. I didn't have to imagine, because I *saw*.

I gazed into the eye and I saw everything . . .

The Arctic plain was barren of snow with the coming of spring. Stalagmitic cairns dotted the bleak surface; great rock-masses that seemed imbedded in the earth, but which might have fallen from the stars. There was no life here; no life as *we* know it, under that brooding sky.

And then life came. The bearded elders of the tribe advanced across the plain in slow processional, bearing the grease-dipped torches. Before them capered the *angekok*, the shaman. He carried the girl in his arms.

She did not struggle, for she had been drugged and lay limp, nude and insensible. The shaman placed her upon the flat outcropping ledge of a cairn, and the drums thundered all around him. This was the chosen one, the maiden sacrifice of spring. She would lie here, her body bared to the savagery of the sullen sky, until night came. And with the coming of night, the dark brothers would venture forth to feast. The wolves of darkness would come to devour that which was their due, and then seek their lairs for a season. Thus spring would come safely to the wilderness, for the eaters of life would be appeased by this sacrifice.

So spoke the drums. And so spoke the shaman. And then the tribesmen shambled away, and their torches died in the distance. The body on the altar lay lifeless as the black maw of the horizon slowly swallowed the sun.

And then the thunder came again, but not from the drums. The sky shook, and a renewed radiance illumined the firmament. The maiden stirred restlessly, awoke. She sat up, stared about her. Her eyes widened for there, in the

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shadows beyond the cairn, she saw the skulkers, the waiting ones. The wolves had come. They snarled at the sky and edged closer. The thunder boomed.

Suddenly they turned; turned and ran, howling. And the ruddy radiance cast blood upon their backs, for a red rain descended.

The maiden rose from the ledge and slipped down, shivering. The earth was shaking all around her, and the cairns tilted crazily, bobbing and weaving in the eery light. The light was coming from the sky—*falling* from the sky!

She turned to flee, but the light pursued. And suddenly it coalesced, condensed into a single, concentrated blaze that soared and swept and swooped between the cairns like a single great eye. An eye that pursued her. An eye that wove a web of light about her nakedness, an eye that settled at her feet so that she halted and stooped down and picked it up, only to drop it with a shriek of mingled pain and horror as the heat seared the flesh of her palms.

But still she stared at it, squatted and stared. And as the thunder waned and the light faded and the night came, she continued to stare. She stared until the eye cooled and she did pick it up and hold it to her breast; an eye that was alive and staring between the two blind eyes of her nipples. And she walked across the barren plain, walked in darkness until she came to the place where her people stayed and slept about their dying fires.

She stared down at the eye and then she picked up the stone knife and she walked among her people and she slew. The knife rose and fell, rose and fell, and they awoke and screamed. But when they saw her eyes, when they saw the third eye she carried, they did not resist, did not attempt escape. She slew until her knife was red to the hilt, until the arm which wielded it was bathed in blood. And then the shaman bowed down before her and the elders worshipped also, for they knew she was the bride of a god. Thereafter it was she who gave in sacrifice and she who wore the eye in an amulet woven to hang between her breasts . . .

In time she died, but the eye lived on. And it moved on. I saw the Tatars come and raid, and the eye moved southward with them on their return march, in the saddlebag of a

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chieftain. He spent hours staring at it before a battle or a raid, and then he slew and slew . . .

And a Mongol took it from the Tatar, and it found its way to India, and for a time it was indeed the eye of a goddess—Kali, the Dark Mother, whose *phansigars* slew with the silken cord . . .

And a Moslem wrested it from the temple, and a Seljuk adventurer took it from the Moslem, and a soldier of Napoleon found it in the plunder from the field of Aboukir. He returned to Marseilles, and for years thereafter Marseilles was haunted by a mass-murderer who roamed abroad at midnight, slitting throats with a bayonet . . .

The police of the last Louis found it during the Commune, and it passed from hand to hand. A Prussian held it for a time (there were a series of brutal slayings in Prague) and a seaman carried it to London where it fell into the possession of an eccentric gentleman who was suddenly impelled to carry on a bloody private crusade against ladies of the evening . . .

And to Russia it returned again, to Holy Mother Russia and Holy Father Rasputin. Staring into its depths, the monk induced visions, in himself and in others who became his victims . . .

The Bolsheviki looter who found it went berserk. The curio-dealer in St. Petersburg sold it to a Greek merchant and then hung himself. The Greek merchant lost it when he went on trial for murder. Chandler Harvey's agent bought it when the government fell and a corrupt official sold a roomful of art treasures, sight unseen, to the highest bidder. It was never unpacked until this morning, when my brother George found it, misplaced in a carton containing mountings of Coptic coins. And the guard saw him pocket it, and he picked up a figurine standing on the table beside him and he crushed the skull of the guard . . .

And he put it inside the panda at the amusement park and carried it with him. There was a great confusion in the mind of my brother George. He couldn't understand why he had killed. He hadn't *meant* to kill. Sure, he saw this hunk of jewelry and he figured it was valuable, who knows? You could get a few bucks for a thing like this, and nobody'd ever miss it. So he put it in his pocket and when this character, this Ray

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Brice, spotted him, he got panicky and started swinging. Only that damned thing was lying on the floor, it had dropped out of his pocket, and it kept staring up at him and he stared back and the next thing you know he was lifting the figurine and smashing it down on Ray Brice's head . . .

I *knew* what my brother had thought. I knew, because the eye knew. It knew what all of them had thought; the naked virgin, the tallow-faced Tatar, the bearded Mongol, the dark priests of Kali, the Mameluke who died at Aboukir, the fiend who gloated in the night of Whitechapel, the monk who strangled his little white doves in orgies at St. Petersburg.

And I knew what drunken Sarah had thought, what she had sensed when she brought George to her studio. What her unbalanced, undisciplined, uncanny artistic intuition had focussed upon without even the necessity of *seeing*—its presence in the panda was enough to set her off. "Kiss me, George." And one arm behind his neck, so, and the other arm free, the hand free to grasp the palette-knife and bring it up, and the redness and the gushing and then the shock, the trauma of the deed accomplished and the realization, and the *fugue* into denial of reality and catharsis combined, the blind painting of the murder-beast . . .

That's what it wanted. That's why it had come from the stars, come to feed. To feed and to feast. Shotwell was right; there *are* other forms of life, other ways of life. And this entity needed nourishment. Sarah had used a knife to bring blood, but George had used a blunt instrument and others had used the cord, the noose, their bare hands. The instrument did not matter, because blood did not matter. It wasn't blood the creature wanted, it wasn't even killing. It fed on something else—on the released emotion of the killer. That's what it needed, that's why it sought life in death. *It ate emotion.*

I stared down at it and it stared up at me, and we both knew.

We knew what was right and what was wrong, and the answer lies in *being*. Being and becoming. To be is the only purpose, and to become more the only goal. One becomes more by destroying lesser being and incorporating itself in one's own essence. One must devour the sensa-

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tion of others, add it to one's awareness and capacity. It is a feast without end, life without end.

To seek emotion in sexuality is a snare and a delusion, for one wastes one's own substance in the attempt; just as one eats himself in attempting to heighten sensation through drugs or drink. So the Beatniks are fools, and their "kicks" merely the convulsive spasms of rigor mortis in a stiffening corpse. And the squares are fools too, because they shun sensation and fear its effects.

And I was doubly a fool and doubly damned because I tried to live so as to make the best of both possible worlds. Not knowing, until now, that there are more than two possible worlds. There are inconceivable worlds beyond worlds beyond the stars, worlds of sensation beyond sensation which I could seek and share.

I'd sensed those worlds when I'd seen what the eye had beheld. Now I knew why some men killed—not because they were fanatics, not because they were sadists, not because they were deranged. They killed because of the hunger which could be sensed and sated, the hunger that never ceased. And while they fed that hunger, they shook the stars. Psychosis, neurosis—meaningless labels, more insane than that which they attempt so inadequately to describe. All words were meaningless. *Dig? Crazy? Kicks? Man? Cool?*

The eye could dig its way into your brain.

The eye was crazy.

The eye was kicks.

Man? *What is man?* You can be greater than man when you share the sensation of a greater being, a greater awareness from a greater world.

Cool. The eye was cool in my hand. It throbbed because it was alive. Alive and staring at me.

Why did it stare?

To tell me these things.

To tell me to help it.

To tell me to help myself.

To *share* with me everything that it was, and could become.

The eye stared up at me. Stared hungrily. That was it. The eye was hungry. It would always be hungry, and I would always be hungry, but if I took it away with me now there would be years of feasting.

And that was the thing to do. The eye and I would go away together. Away from

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the stupid world of squares and the equally stupid world of Beatniks.

Now I knew how they all must have felt—the famed and feared killers of the past.

And I turned to go. That was my sole intention, merely to go.

I didn't expect to find Lucy standing there. I could scarcely see her, actually, because the eyes were all around me, the ring of hungry eyes.

I couldn't really see her any more than I could really see the bread-knife on the table.

All I could see was the eye.

And all I could do was what must be done.

I reached for Lucy.

I reached for the knife.

And I fed the hungry eye—

THE END

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THE BLACKBIRD

By JACK SHARKEY

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Mix a strange Oriental, a prissy New England town, a series of deaths, a namby-pamby lawyer, and—a surprise witness! You have the weirdest cock-eyedest trial in the history of East Anchorville, or anywhere else!

THE Turk, true to traditions established by writers of Arabian adventure stories, was a giant. The villagers of East Anchorville—named from its geographic relation to the larger town of Anchorville—were sure from the moment he'd first appeared in town that no good would

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come of it. No one would admit to being actually afraid of him, but everyone was of the mind that caution was the prime consideration when dealing with him. So it was only natural that, when the horrors began, all minds should arrow like iron filings to the magnet of the Turk's mysterious nature.

The horrors began in the autumn, when the dry leaves clogged the irrigation ditches of the hinterlands, and cold gray dust sifted underfoot on the nubbly dirt roads about the town, and nightfall was an occurrence to be watched from inside one's home, with door bolted and fireplace glowing with burning logs.

Harriet Cord, the belle of the village (and bane of the womenfolk) had gone out for a buggy-ride with Marvin Sply, son of the late village blacksmith, toward sundown. Old folks in the town could be seen to purse their lips and cluck their tongues as the couple clattered out of town on Marvin's buckboard, an heirloom from his father, one hand on the horse's reins and the other quite definitely on Harriet.

Two hours later, Marvin had come back into town alone, his eyes wild, clothing awry, and lips spouting a dreadful tale. The rattle of the buckboard entering the main street with the horse at full frantic gallop had brought out a curious crowd, including the town sheriff, who, on hearing Marvin's hysterical tale, had turned at once into Grogan's Saloon to round up some help, and was seen no more that night.

Villagers, men and women alike, had gotten aboard wagons, horses, and into the few automobiles the town boasted, and taken off for the scene of the crime, for such they were already convinced it was.

It was a terrible sight that met their eyes.

Harriet lay by the side of the road, stone cold dead, her face forever frozen into a bewildered sneer. There was not a mark upon the body, but clutched in the left hand they found a single black feather, large and shiny . . .

The coroner's verdict was, "Death of an unknown and mysterious nature, at the hands of person or persons unknown."

Suspicion immediately fastened upon the Turk.

His landlady, who "ran a respectable place," was of a mind to put him out at once. Mrs. Balsam didn't want "no truck with mon-

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sters" in her boarding house. But she somehow felt that walking up the three flights to his attic room alone was not the easiest of tasks, and could find no one to accompany her upstairs—her husband suddenly decided to mow the lawn although the grass was yellowed and sere, and "didn't ask to have that fellow room there in the first place"—so she thought she'd bide her time and wait.

Thelma Bracy, her next-door neighbor, was of the opinion that Mrs. Balsam should dope his food and call the police to take him, and it was then for the first time that the odd fact came to light that the Turk had never taken a meal in Mrs. Balsam's establishment, though dinner and supper were included with the room rates. Within an hour after Thelma heard this bit of information, the word was out all over town, and the even more amazing fact came to light that no person in the town had *ever* seen the Turk take a meal, anywhere.

The sheriff (who had eventually arrested Marvin Sply for want of any other suspects) was informed of this turn of events at once. Or, rather, as soon as he was located, in Grogan's saloon. And he informed Mrs. Balsam that the best thing to do under the "circumstances"—the Turk was seven feet tall and about 250 pounds—was to wait and watch.

Marvin, when he awoke the next morning in his cell at the East Anchorville jail, had demanded that he be let out at once, denying any knowledge of the means or motive of Harriet's death. His story was that they'd taken a stroll across a field, and it had grown too dark for Harriet to navigate the field back to the buckboard without turning a well-turned ankle, so Marvin had cut across to the other side of the field after their transportation, and driven the buckboard back to where she should have been standing. He'd at first thought she'd gone, till he espied a pale white hand upon the edge of the roadside ditch, and, on investigating the hand, located Harriet on the other end of it.

The sheriff was adamant. Marvin was there; no one else was. So Marvin did it. The sheriff was quite positive in his accusation, and determined to keep Marvin in jail till he rotted. And he probably would have done so, had not a group of the sheriff's

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constituents — irritated because their horses were losing shoes like mad, and wagon spokes were falling out, and fenders needed undenting—insisted that Marvin be released to his blacksmith duties. The sheriff gave in, albeit grudgingly, but made Marvin promise to return to the jail at nightfall, which promise was given with alacrity.

The townsfolk were shocked that afternoon to learn that Marvin, on the pretext of going to Anchorville for supplies of some sort, had instead boarded a westbound express for San Francismo undoubtedly never to return.

The sheriff was about to put out a national alarm for the fugitive when a panicky farmer dashed into the sheriff's office to announce the second horror.

Abel Stanley, the town's leading hog-raiser, had been found dead in his pigpen, his noble heart forever stilled, his terrified blue eyes staring sightlessly into a trough of swill. And stuck into the brim of his hat was a shiny, blue-black feather.

And even as the sheriff was running toward Grogan's saloon for deputies, Tom the Barkeep came running out to meet him with news of horror number three.

Edward Forbes — who, while not the town drunkard, was next in line for the office —had been discovered under the bar at Grogan's, his open mouth beneath the spigot of an emptied whisky keg, with a shiny black feather in his buttonhole, completely deceased. But this time the barkeep—under the clear-sighted direction of the sheriff (from the far end of the bar)—found a *mark* on the body; a strange-hued star-shaped discoloration beneath the left armpit. But on the coroner's report that this was a birthmark, the town threw up its hands in despair.

The panic began to spread through the heretofore placid village. Thelma Bracy's significant remarks about the Turk began to take their toll of credible people. Mothers in the town, hoping to discourage the apparently passionately neat killer, began to belt, whip and otherwise mar their children, as a safety measure. "Bruise 'em or lose 'em!" became the battle cry.

The Turk—and not strangely at all, since he was not on speaking terms with any of the villagers—had not yet, on this the third day after Harriet's demise, heard a thing

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about the horrors. So it was not strange that he dared to show his face in the town square, striding along mightily toward Gulby's Drugstore. He thought it unusual that the town children, whose wont it was to dog his patient footsteps while chanting some abominably - rhymed ballad about cranberry sauce and people from Turkey, did not do so this day. Indeed, they all vanished into houses, up trees, and around corners as soon as the measured clump of his heavy boots announced his imminent arrival at the town square.

As he ducked his prodigious torso enough to permit passing his head through the door of the store, all the customers turned and stared at him, white-faced and speechless.

Gulby the Druggist who was the excitable type, blurted out, "It's *him!!* The *fiend!*" and made his short speech memorable by collapsing upon the toothpaste stand, his paunchy frame carrying the hapless display to the floor, where the weight of his body pressed resolutely downward, causing him to sag amid a spreading wiggle of fluoridated dental cream.

"Evil eye!" screamed the villagers in the store, and, covering their eyes with one hand, outstretched the other like stiff-arming football players and rushed pellmell from the drugstore.

Now the sheriff was really on the spot. An angry body of citizens came to his office and demanded that he arrest the monster (for, who could it be but the Turk?) at once, or they'd put their democratic powers of recall into immediate effect and elect a new sheriff.

That settled him. Bolstering up his courage for an hour at Grogan's Saloon, he proceeded to Mrs. Balsam's boarding house, up the stairs, called out the Turk (who came along amiably enough), and ensconced him in the cell so recently vacated by Marvin Sply. When he became sober enough to realize the enormity of what he'd done, he headed for Grogan's at once, to try and blot out the memory.

Well, the fat was in the fire.

With the arrest made, there had to be a trial.

The whole village perked up at the news. Ladies all went out and bought new dresses, new bonnets, new shoes, and new coats, and men all went over to Grogan's to discuss the facts of the case.

The sheriff was there, as usual, and as the men talked,

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and the conversation became more uncertain and faltering, the horrible truth came out that no one at all knew *anything* about the case.

Immediate action had to be taken.

The sheriff's brother, who was also Assistant District Attorney, was the editor of the town paper. A quick phone call from the sheriff, and the Contest came out in the next issue of the East Anchorville News. The good word spread throughout Massachusetts.

Entries, mostly from women, started pouring in.

BE A WITNESSS! proclaimed the paper. ENTER NOW!

Testimonies were chosen on the basis of thought, creative imagery, and knowledge of the English language. Thelma Bracy's was by far the best—due, she admitted freely, to a correspondence course she'd once taken in Novel Writing—and the town knew it had a star witness in Thelma.

Excitement was at its zenith. It was like the good old days of witch-hunting all over again.

The sun rose and set and rose again, and it was the day of the trial.

Everyone in town was packed into the narrow courthouse. People from neighboring townships had driven all night to get there for the gala event. Popcorn, cotton candy and cold beer—to the annoyance of the local clergy—were sold on the steps of the courthouse, and the judge, who owned the local brewery, was out there pushing the sales along until almost time for the trial to begin.

The widows of the deceased men—Gulby had passed away during his sensational tumble into the toothpaste, leaving the bereaved widow with her memories and thirty thousand dollars' Life Insurance—sat well up in front, waiting to see justice done. To ensure a fast pyrotechnic trial and a verdict of "guilty," they'd been careful to have the D.A. (the town's sharpest lawyer, and the brother-in-law of the local editor) send off to Anchorville for three of the greenest lawyers that could be found, fresh from Anchorville U. Law School, and from the three the widows had picked what they hoped was the dullest one.

Thomas Bit, their choice, now sat with the silent Turk, fingering his collar nervously, and sharpening his pencil every five minutes. The eyes of the eastern seaboard were upon the courthouse that day, and he'd be an overnight suc-

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cess if he could bring in a verdict of "not guilty."

He wished that the town had been a little larger, for it had been impossible to get anyone on the jury who didn't seem to be either a relative of one of the dead men or a good friend of Harriet Cord. As far as that went, *all* the people seemed to have known Harriet Cord. Had she been the only victim, and had he been able to select a jury of the local women . . . Thomas Bit sighed.

His Honor, wiping a bit of foam off his chin, hurried up the aisle toward his chambers, vanished within them, then the court clerk called everyone to order, and the judge appeared in his solemn black robes, lurched up the steps to the bench, and sat with a loud thud, his eyes somewhat glazed and lips smiling inanely.

Thomas Bit noted this and groaned in his soul.

His Honor rapped sharply for order, dropped the gavel accidently upon the bald pate of the court scribe, had it recovered and handed back to him rapped again, and the trial was on!

Ervin Burns, the D. A., approached the nervous Mrs. Balsam, his grey eyes steely and stern, and manner impeccably modeled after a movie he'd once seen of an infamous trial. Mrs. Balsam no bantamweight by any stretch of the imagination still managed to shrink to a more compact size as he loomed over her, pince-nez held between right forefinger and thumb.

"You are Nettie Balsam?"

"I am Nettie Balsam," she answered, after a thoughtful pause.

"You run the boarding house where the murderer lived?"

"Objection!" yelled Thomas Bit, springing to his feet. "The guilt of this man is what we are here to prove!"

The laughter in the courtroom was deafening until His Honor raised a tolerant hand and waved it to a chuckling murmur. "Please, Mister Bit, you must not interrupt Mister Burns at his work, if you wish the same consideration when she is *your* witness. Then you will have your chance."

Abashed, Thomas Bit sank shakily into his chair. "It looks pretty hopeless," he whispered to the Turk. The Turk merely shrugged his great shoulders and remained stolidly silent.

"You run the boarding house where the *alleged* murderer lived?" asked the D.A.

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Thomas Bit sighed, softly, and chewed his nails.

"I do," said Mrs. Balsam. "I run a respectable place!" she added.

There were a few cheers from the front row, where some of her other boarders sat. Mister Balsam hadn't come that morning. He was at home asleep.

"And did you ever note anything . . . *mysterious* . . . about this man?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Balsam severely. "He never ate any of my cooking."

"Nothing mysterious about *that!*" came a sotto voce comment from the rear.

The D.A. cleared his throat, and stared the impertinent one into red-faced silence. Then he smiled at Mrs. Balsam.

"And why is that odd?"

"Because the meals're included in the room rates. Seems funny a man'd spend money for something and then not use it."

The D.A. smiled and nodded wisely. "Very funny, indeed. What, in your opinion is the reason for this?"

"Objection!" Thomas Bit was on his feet. "We're here to get facts, not opinions!"

The judge gave him a baleful stare. "Oh, *come* now!"

Thomas Bit sank into his chair, completely defeated. "This is awful," he said to the Turk.

The Turk shrugged again and scratched the back of his head.

"In my opinion," she said, shuddering, "he didn't eat or drink anything because he lived on human blood! . . . Or *worse!*" she added, darkly.

Thomas Bit hid his face in his hands and manfully resisted bursting into tears.

"That will be all," smiled the D.A. "Your witness."

Thomas Bit composed himself as best he could and approached the witness stand. Mrs. Balsam looked at him warily, like a duck watching a woman stitching up a new pillowcase.

"Mrs. Balsam . . ." he began.

"Objection!" thundered the D.A.

"Sustained!" said the judge.

In the rear row, the editor of the paper smiled happily and wrote furiously in a small pad on his knee. Things were going indeed well, and it was an election year, too.

"Er . . ." Thomas Bit faltered, then tried again. "You *are* Nettie Balsam?"

"Yes," she said.

"Has the accused ever given you any trouble as a boarder?"

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"Well, no . . . but—"

"Has he ever done anything positively unusual?"

"He didn't eat my cooking!"

"Then why—" Thomas Bit leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, "did you charge him for it?"

Nettie Balsam faltered. This was a side-issue the D.A. hadn't covered in rehearsals. "Because— Because with the extra money, I could buy more food for the other boarders!"

"Then," said Thomas Bit, pressing his point home, "you never *did* cook any meals for the Turk. I'll bet if I were to subpoena your boarders, it would turn out you never even set a place at the table for him! Is that correct?"

Nettie Balsam burst into tears. "Well, I did at first, for the first week he st-stayed at my place, b-but when I saw he wasn't going to eat, I j-just used the extra money." She broke into uncontrolled sobbing at this point and couldn't go on.

Thomas Bit paused until the flood had abated somewhat, then said in a more kindly tone: "Then the loss of this man as a boarder—if he is convicted—is taking money out of your pocket?"

Nettie's tear-blurred eyes widened at this insidious aspect of the thing, heretofore unconsidered. "Why . . . you're right!"

Thomas Bit took a step back and indicated the Turk, sitting unperturbed at the table before the bench. "Then do you think this man had anything to do with the horrors?"

Before the shaken D.A. could object, Nettie Balsam shouted, "*No!* A thousand times no! He's innocent as a babe, and, when this is over, he'll have his own little room waiting for him same as always . . ." She hesitated. "At the same rates of course."

"Of course," said Thomas Bit. "You may step down."

Nettie Balsam did so, quite contented with herself. In the back row, the editor gnashed his teeth in impotent fury. And the three widows were frozen in stony hatred. Who did this young upstart think he was? The first good murder case in years and he's making out that the killer is innocent! One of them even wished, momentarily, that her husband were still alive.

The D.A., fairly recovered from the near-mortal blow dealt him, called Thelma Bracy to the stand. A hush fell over the room as she waddled proudly up to the small railed-in witness seat. After all, she was something

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of a celebrity, the star witness whose picture was all over the front page of the local paper, looking knowing and wise.

She immediately crossed one knee over the other. Her knees were not visible, due to the wide slats of the railing, but she crossed them anyhow.

"Your name?" the D.A. was unctuously charming.

"Thelma. Thelma Bracy." She looked out to where reporters from neighboring towns were clustered, pencils poised over notebooks. "T-h-e-l-m-a B-r-a . . ."

"Miss Bracy—" the D.A. interrupted swiftly, "will you please tell the court where you live?"

"I live at 115 West Pike—P-i-k-e—right next door to the house where the *murderer* lived!"

All eyes in the room turned instantly to Thomas Bit, who now had his chance to louse things up. He sighed, shrugged, and shook his head. A murmur of relief went up, and one of the widows even smiled a little. Things were looking up.

"Would you please tell us," continued the D.A. "exactly what you saw on the night of the late-lamented Harriet Cord's demise?"

A profound hush settled over the room, and all eyes riveted on Thelma, who cleared her throat carefully and began her tale.

"It was hard upon the hour of midnight," she said, almost in a whisper. Even Thomas Bit was magnetized by her tone. "Chill was the night, but fain did I long for a current of air to relieve the unwonted stuffiness of my bedchamber. Went I then toward my casement, to ope my room to the night air . . ." She paused, and added, less studiedly, "My window's right across from the side of Nettie's boarding house . . ."

The hush grew more profound.

"The window of *that man's room!*" She stabbed a finger dramatically and accusingly at the Turk. "It was closed, but *lo!* there was a flickering light inside. I, of course, do not make it a pratice to look into the windows of men with whom I am hardly acquainted, so I was about to turn back to my bed, when suddenly—" Her face went blank. "When suddenly—" She repeated miserably, looking at the D.A., who had closed his eyes in exasperation.

Thelma drew back a pace in her monolgue, and tried taking a running start to get over the hump. "I-was-about-to-

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turn - back - to - my - bed - when - suddenly . . ." She brightened. "When *suddenly,* the window flew open, banging the sash quite loudly, and that man—" Some of the folks in the Turk's vicinity edged away from him furtively. "—peered out in a very suspicious fashion, then stepped he back from the window. Frozen to the spot by nameless apprehensions, waited I there, and then— Something big and black and horrible flopped onto his windowsill from within his room."

The D.A.—albeit having heard the tale at rehearsals—had still to moisten dry lips before speaking. "What was it?" he asked, his voice shaky.

"A giant blackbird!" said Thelma.

(Careful research on her part into Arabian customs and history had unearthed the fact that the raven was considered an almost-sacred harbinger of dire things by the Arabs and Turks, and she'd changed the name of the bird into a species conforming to her listeners' experience.)

"It flapped its great black wings, rose into the air, and then, as though sensing something, it flew away."

"Which way—" the D.A. made the question assume great importance by his tone, "—Which way did it fly?"

Thelma paused dramatically, then looked upon the Turk with the eye of a basilisk, rose to her feet and said, "Straight east!"

A furor broke out in the room. The body of Harriet Cord had been found almost due east of the Town; in the minds of the townsfolk, the guilt of the Turk was as good as written on the court record.

Thomas Bit shook his head. There was nothing to do but sit tight and wait for his turn at Thelma.

She hadn't finished. "Something made me stay there, watching, for almost a quarter of an hour. Finally, it had grown too cold to stand by the window, so I closed it. And just as I did, the blackbird flew back, and it heard the window closing, because it turned and looked at me. And suddenly I was terribly afraid, and I ran back to my bed and did throw myself under the blankets!"

"And then?" asked the D.A.

". . . I fell asleep," she finished lamely.

"Your witness." said the D.A. to Thomas Bit.

Thomas Bit took a deep breath to steady his nerves and approached the stand. "Miss Bracy," he said, "are

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you aware that it was early evening when Marvin Sply went out with Harriet Cord on her ill-fated ride?"

"Of course," she said. "Everyone knows that."

"And are you further aware that he was back in a matter of hours?"

"Sure," she said.

"Then how could there possibly be any connection between the blackbird you claimed you saw and Harriet Cord's death, if the blackbird's nocturnal flight was shortly after midnight?"

Thelma drew herself up, proud and confident. "A supernatural creature is not bound by the ordinary laws of time and space," she replied.

There was considerable applause from the spectators, which the judge indulgently permitted to die down of its own accord, while Thomas Bit gritted his teeth to keep from breaking down and sobbing.

"Spernatural!?" he said, fiercely. "Do you expect a court of law to recognize such a statement?"

"Son," said the judge, not unkindly, "this is the State of Massachusetts . . ."

Approaching despair, Thomas Bit tried one more query.

"Would you kindly tell the court just what you think this 'blackbird' of yours did to cause the deaths of Miss Cord and the three men, Stanley, Forbes and Gulby?"

"Certainly," said Thelma. "That man is a werebird!"

"A *werebird?*" Thelma nodded. "Human by day, feathered fiend by night. Flying the countryside after sundown, in hideous unnatural guise, sucking the souls from helpless people that cross his gruesome path!"

"Your Honor," said Thomas Bit, "I move that this testimony be stricken from the record as irrelevant, fanciful, and just plain ridiculous."

"Overruled," said His Honor.

Shoulders drooping, Thomas Bit said, "No further questions," and returned to his seat, beside his client.

"I call Herbert Hoskins, M. D., to the stand," said the D.A. The town coroner arose and made his way to the witness seat.

As Thomas Bit doodled hopelessly on a pad of paper, hardly listening to the testimony of the coroner, a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder. He looked up into the face of a stranger, a sporty-looking fellow with a pink-tipped nose and thick muttonchop sidewhiskers. The stranger winked his eye.

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"Having a bit of difficulty, eh?" he smiled.

"Who are you?" asked the lawyer.

"Wallen's the name, son. Wilbert Wallen. I'm sort of a speciaist in rare diseases. That's why I'm here."

Thomas Bit cocked an eyebrow at the stranger. "I'm afraid I don't see—"

"You will, son, you will," said Wilbert Wallen, seating himself beside the young lawyer. "I'm your star witness."

"My *what*?" said Thomas Bit.

Wallen began to explain, in a low, urgent whisper. As his meaning became clear to Bit, the lawyer's eyes grew round, and the subtle beginnings of a smile touched his lips for the first time that day.

"You're kidding!" he said to Wallen.

"Scout's honor," said the specialist. "Soon's I read about the case in the papers, I got to East Anchorville fast as I could."

"Zowie!" said Thomas Bit, reverently.

Burns, the D.A., finished with Hoskins.

"Your witness," he said.

"No questions," said Thomas Bit.

"Not giving up, are you?" asked the D.A. with a tiny simpering smile.

"I call Wilbert Wallen, *M.D.*, to the stand," said the lawyer. The courtroom buzzed, and the D.A. and the judge exchanged looks, raised eyebrows, and shrugs as Wallen took the stand.

"Your name?" asked Thomas Bit.

"Wilbert Wallen."

"Occupation?"

"Pathologist. My specialty is rare diseases."

The room grew strangely quiet.

"Can you perhaps throw some light on these four deaths which the accused is supposed to have brought about?"

"*Light?*" Wallen chuckled. "I can tell you exactly what caused them!"

"Would you please do so . . .?" said Thomas Bit.

"Well . . ." Wallen cleared his throat, loudly. "I have just come from the Ogilvy Funeral Parlor, wherein Miss Cord, and Messieurs Gulby, Forbes and Stanley are lying in state. It seems as if the employees of that establishment were all over here at the trial—in fact, this whole burg looks like a ghost town today —so I took the opportunity to examine the four."

"That's against the law!"

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thundered the judge. "Without a court order, bodies of deceased persons may not be subjected to—"

"Your honor," Thomas Bit interrupted smoothly, "in this case, there was no time to await a court order."

"No time?" said the judge. "What do you mean, no time?"

"For the sake of the town—which includes Your Honor, of course—Doctor Wallen had to move quickly."

The spectators murmured, louder and louder, until the judge rapped for silence. "Mister Bit! Are you implying . . . There's something *ominous* in your tone."

"If Your Honor will hear Doctor Wallen out?"

"Most irregular . . ." His Honor hedged. Then his curiosity got the better of his jurisprudence, and he nodded. "Very well. But it better be good."

"I found," Wallen continued, "that Miss Harriet Cord was what you might call a 'carrier'. A sort of Typhoid Mary."

The judge's face paled. "A carrier of *what?*" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

"A very rare disease, known in the trade as *Leprosis Arboris,* a sort of cross between Jungle Rot and Chestnut Blight. The victim's innards turn to sawdust. It's more or less painless. There's no approach in this disease, no warnings. One moment you're full of vigor, the next moment . . . *'Foosh.'* "

"Foosh?" asked the judge.

Wallen nodded. "All the internal organs crumble into a nice oaken dust." He sighed, and scratched his nose. "It's rather painfully obvious what happened. Somehow, those unfortunate men came in contact with Miss Cord—"

The three widows stiffened and gasped in unison.

"—and they were goners."

All over the courtroom, men were losing color, and wives were narrowing eyes. The judge, his face the color of buttermilk, asked, with a break in his voice, "Is— Is there any cure?"

"Oh, certainly." Wallen smiled. "Rose petals."

"Rose petals?" A note of hope had crept into the judge's voice. He had a rosebush on his estate, and he was certain the autumn cold had spared a few tiny buds.

"Yup," said Wallen. "No processing, either. Just pop one in your mouth like candy, chew it, swallow it, and presto!, you're as good as new."

At the rear of the room, a

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man slipped toward the door, then another man, and another. His Honor's eye caught the motion, and he remembered that his rosebush was near the roadside where everyone in town must have admired it.

Judge, D.A., coroner, sheriff, editor and every last townsman in the room clawed, punched and kicked his way out the door.

When the thundering died down, and the dust began to settle, Thomas Bit shook Wallen's hand.

"I guess the case is dismissed," he said. "You've made me a success. I've won my first case. Is there anything I can do for you? Can I buy you a beer, take you to lunch, pay for your transportation to your home?"

Wallen laughed and clapped Bit on the back, shaking his head. "No thanks, son. Don't drink beer, brought my lunch, and my transportation's arranged for."

He picked up a small bag, tied with twine, and began to undo it. The Turk, smiling happily, sat down beside Wallen. "Thanks, Uncle Wilbert," he said, fondly.

"Least I could do." Wallen smiled. "You being my sister's boy, and all."

"You're related?" Thomas Bit gasped.

"Well, of course." Then Wallen frowned. "Gad, son, don't tell me *you* fell for that mumbojumbo on the stand?"

"I—" Thomas Bit sank weakly onto a bench. "You mean it wasn't true? The disease and all?"

"Heck, no," said Wallen. "Made the whole danged thing up outa my head. Good, wasn't it? . . . Gosh, boy, I ain't even a doctor."

Bit's heart sank slowly into the quicksand of dread that oozed into his breast. "But all those people—out in the cold —eating roses!—"

"Won't hurt 'em none," said Wallen, smiling. "Fresh air'll do em good."

"But why'd you *do* it?" asked Thomas Bit.

Wallen finished unwrapping his lunch, and indicated the Turk with a tilt of his head. "Couldn't let him down. My only sister's boy, you know. She died. I brought him up."

"You brought him up . . ." Thomas Bit mumbled blankly.

"Sure," said Uncle Wilbert. "Raised him from an egg."

As icy horror began to tickle Thomas Bit's frayed nerve-endings, Uncle Wilbert leaned over to him in a friendly manner and extended the box of lunch.

"Have a worm?" he asked.

THE END

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A GRAIN OF MANHOOD

By PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

The child was conceived in mystery, and delivered in fear. But the strange magic of Kolanddro was not yet over.

SHE was lying formless; the contour of her body was lost except for the white ring of pain that worked its way downwards every so often like a wedding ring over a swollen knuckle. All her other miseries were encompassed by this masterpiece of nature, a force at one with lightning and thunder, the hurricane, the great reach of the four-thousand-year-old sequoia.

In the intervals she was a person again, and she turned her eyes to James, who was standing at the window watching white peaks rising out of the shadow of night. And she asked for the first time, "James, what will you do when this is over?"

"I don't know." He spoke through the window to the sky. In spite of the unexpected hurry to the hospital he was wearing his dark suit, pressed and fresh, and a tie knotted with painful neatness.

"Why do you always call me James?" he asked suddenly. "Why not Jim, or any other short thing?"

She would have said, Why not, it's your name, but she was too miserable for even the feeblest humor. "I don't know. You always seemed like a James to me. Hair parted neatly, folded handkerchief in pocket, buckled briefcase." And on Earth perhaps a bowler hat and tight furled umbrella. "It seemed suitable."

"You mean stodgy and prissy."

"No, James, just suitable. It seems right for you, and I've always liked you as you are."

But he kept his lips com-

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pressed and his eyes on the white peaks.

The hospital lay in the crater's plain circled by the mountains of Axmith's Territory II. Not a person in the whole of the Community who did not know them, and all he had ever wanted was to dissolve among them like a grain of salt without much more color or savor. She liked him as he was—and what she had done to him!

"You never have explained to me—" he began.

"Oh, James, let it go!" She tensed suddenly on the bed and then tried to make herself limp and slide under the coil of pain. "You wouldn't let me, all those dreadful months. Now I don't want to."

Light reflected back on his face from the mountains of Axtu, and for a moment it showed open and vulnerable. Warily she rested her hands over the frenetic writhing in her belly and said bitterly, "A virgin birth would have seemed more reasonable to you."

He said in the precise way she claimed she had never hated, "There are at least three people on Axtu beside us who know I am sterile."

Shut up! Shut up! You married me because there was a good job for a married man out here! Shut up! "And of course no-one could want me but you, James, it seems certain to you." Perhaps not. She stared at the pale green ceiling, green walls, palely enameled night-table, water-pitcher, callow-colored with the uncertain light reflected from the western wall of the pumice crater. All things sullen, solid, a hard shine to them. In her mind colors flickered, shifting pure prism-hues, only paled and whitened by pain, till she opened her eyes to the nothingness of reality.

"It's almost impossible to explain," she said. "I know it's the old song—"

He opened his mouth and closed it. Then he said, "When *that* is born—"

"I'll go away, if you like. You'll never have to see me or it again."

"Don't be foolish. It can't be hidden now. Damn it, why couldn't you have gotten rid of it, like any other woman?"

"Why couldn't you have had children like any other man?" she said softly. It drew the blood to his face. Could she ever have pretended to love this man, who used so much nastiness to cover his vulnerability? She said gently, "When we found we couldn't

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have children, I couldn't help being restless . . . all the money we'd saved with my working, and I hadn't seen my folks for three years . . ." The time-old tale of alien grain. No use saving the money for the child, and she used it to visit Earth.

But she had forgotten that life on Earth was what she had married to get away from. There was nothing for her, and all she had was her return fare to Axtu, and she started back.

But the shipwreck changed it.

She shared the liferaft with the mutilated body of an old woman who had taught her to embroider the Italian Hemstitch a few hours before; it took three days till the boat homed on a safe planet and landed battered and useless on the rocky shores of a lake. The equipment seemed crushed. The radio had told her that the air and water were compatible, but now it was silent, and she had no idea whether it was still sending the automatic SOS, nor how to repair it or use it.

She crawled outside at last, poising on jagged rocks that bruised her feet, and looked out over the grey expanse of the lake, flat and sunless.

"This is nothing worse than the hell I've always lived in," she thought. She grinned in despair and went back into the boat to salvage food.

The lake was in a crater-like depression, a stony saucer of water, and she was unable to see beyond the rim. She had been asleep when the boat landed and had never seen the planet's face—a grim tumbling sleep with the consciousness of the blanket-wrapped body beside her, the vacuum of loneliness in an old woman who died without her descendants around her. There was only one other blanket. She stuffed it into a canvas bag with some concentrates and a canteen and slung it over her shoulder. There was not much to eat. Even if there was her survival would only be a matter of inertia.

She stared around once more. There was no sign of movement, not a wind carrying gull-cries, scuttling run of lizard, or oozing of any alien life she might have imagined. The air and water might be all right, but the planet gave no sign of being any more generous than that.

There was a tinge of chill to the grey air; she wiped sweating palms on her skirt as she began to climb up the rim. Once her foot dislodged a

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stone; it rolled downward for a few feet, and that was the first sound she heard beyond the beating of her own heart.

She climbed, and before she reached the top she began to hear something more: the trill of a pipe so faint and uncertain it might have been the singing of blood in her brain. But it grew and paced with her as she stumbled on; it traced the whorl of her ear.

Light grew overhead, palely, and then burst into a burning sun; as though she had risen out of a cloud the sky became blue. The points of the rocks dulled, the ground softened. She was walking on clipped green turf.

She stopped, took off her shoes, and stood with her toes pressed in the grass, dropping the canvas bag from her shoulder. The piper was walking beside her, fingering the stops. His scales were blue, green, amber, and silver; colors writhed on him like the lights on a peacock's neck.

The unfluid walls of plaster and fiber-board faced her, and the falsely soothing colors of metal-frame tables. "That was Kolanddro," she said. "I didn't have to explain anything to him. He knew already."

"As I never did," said James, and added half under his breath, "—and never will."

She remembered the months of nights she had lived alone with a half-formed creature in her, screaming in nightmare that it was clawing and ripping its way out through the frail membranes of protection that were all she had been able to give it—or maintain against it . . .

The former face of the planet had crumbled like a clay mask. Here there were many heavy-leaved trees; grass grew damp and cool beneath them. But in the sunshine the strange people who lived here had raised gaudy paper pavilions of pure color. They came at the sound of the pipe and gathered round her. She would have said that they were dressed, but they were wearing only the fur, scales, or bat-wings their curious nature had given them, and there were no two alike.

They were humanoid, but flat-nosed and narrow-jawed; it was hard to find the form beneath the skin. Some of the feathered and crested ones looked like the Eighteenth Century Romantic's idea of the Noble Savage, but she was unable to find either nobility or evil in their faces.

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The scaled man beside her said, "This is Nev; I'm Kolanddro, and you see these are my people. You came from the wrecked boat."

"I did. However did you learn my language?"

"I translate alien tongues. I'm the Interpreter." That explained it to him, perhaps.

He lowered his shining lids with the effect of a smile. "You'll understand it later."

"I see. You people are telepathic."

"No. *I'm* telepathic. That's why I'm the Interpreter."

"And I don't have to tell you that my name's Lela Gordon, and that I'm from Earth, etc."

"Nor ask to see anyone more important than me, because no-one will understand you."

She smiled, and then sighed. "It doesn't seem very easy to leave here. Can you help me?"

But he had turned to speak to someone, and she looked around at the Nevids who had approached her. They returned her interest with a kind of inoffensive curiosity, and when they had seen enough left to go about their business. Kolanddro brought her a bowl of fruit and fresh bread.

"We don't make this kind of thing with our grain, but we

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baked it when it became evident that you would be with us."

"Are you clairvoyant too?"

He made a glittering gesture. "I have a great range. There's little I can't do here." He blinked. "No, I cannot repair your boat. We haven't many hard metals here—and besides, we don't need them." He pointed out a winged man who resembled the Spirit of Communication which for centuries had graced the telephone book. "We have Messengers." He tapped his head. "We have Interpreters." Recognizing the panic rising in her he said quite anxiously, "Please eat. You won't come to any harm here."

"I believe you," she said. "But the strangeness—it's almost overpowering." But she calmed her fears finally and ate her meal under the tossing dappled shade. The bread was rather heavy, but good enough for something of which the recipe had been deduced from a fleeting picture in a sleeping mind.

Kolanddro asked suddenly, "What is lemon soufflé?"

"Something I'm glad I didn't dream of while I was sleeping," said Lela. She added very gently, "I really don't like having my mind read."

"While you are staying here, you will have to get used to it," said Kolanddro.

But I don't want to stay here. It filled her with uneasiness, the strangeness and the sense of having already become completely integrated into the life of the planet in an hour's time. She thought of the old woman dead in the boat who might have been happy to spend the last years of her age under his sun, and brushed crumbs from her skirt.

"I think I'd better stay near the boat in case the signal's working."

He stared at her with his black and green eyes. "You'll never reach the boat without my help," he touched the pipe, "and you won't come back, or even remember all this. There will be no more food or shelter for you."

She said slowly, "Open Sesame?"

"The connotation's unclear. I see, an old story (perhaps you'll tell it to me sometime?) —yes, something like that."

"Kolanddro," she spoke to his still shadow on the grass, ". . . are you an illusion?"

"You will have to decide that for yourself."

The chill that crimped her skin was not an illusion, at least not more so than the whole cosmos of matter.

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Where in relation to this place was the grey lake and the overcast sky?

"There's nothing to be afraid of here," said Kolanddro. He ran a pearl nail around the rind of a yellow fruit and halved it. "But if you stay here, you must live as one of us. We like privacy and we don't let anyone leave us who'll endanger it. You must understand that."

"There is a great deal of beauty here," she said reluctantly.

"There is," he said. "We know what kinds of things aliens will bring us. We've had experiences with them." He stood up. "I'm busy now, but most people like to rest in the heat of the afternoon. I think you will be glad of a rest; you may have my house." He pointed out a particularly vivid pavilion of crimson and purple. He swallowed the rest of the fruit, spat out four green pips into the palm of his hand, and cast them to the winds.

"Four more zimb trees," he said.

"You had already forgotten me by then," said James.

"James, I thought you would have been glad to forget me . . . they wouldn't have taken your job away from you here just because your wife was lost in space."

"That wasn't why I married you."

"If there was another reason it was because feeling so trodden on yourself you had to have someone to hurt in turn."

"Don't, Lela. I never meant to hurt you."

But she was thinking of the last few months of sullen meals, crushing silence and loneliness. *What in hell are we going to do with a little creature who looks as if he'd escaped from a prism, no matter how appealing he may be esthetically? How can we keep him here? How can we hide him?*

The color flows on you like the broken light of a prism.

"All you people," she said to Kolanddro, "have the same form basically—I think—but there are no two of you alike on the surface. That seems impossible."

"Not when our germ plasm is almost infinitely tractable."

"What do you mean?"

"We can take in any form of intelligent alien life. The children become pure Nevids within three generations."

"How?"

"All psychokinetic faculties on Nev don't rest in the Interpreters—although I will say," he added complacently, "that

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most of the intelligence does. All Nevid parents have a choice in deciding before the child is born what form it will take—at least externally, not in the vital organs."

"And the child has no choice in the matter?"

"No. His happiness depends on how well he lives with the shape we give him."

"And if he doesn't?"

"He'll have an unhappy but interesting life."

She shivered. "I don't think I'd like that for my children."

He waved an arm around at the Colony and the multicolored flow of the strange people and the windrippled walls of their houses. "A quarter of these people were descended from aliens. We've found for every alien an Interpreter who could bring him into the life of the planet. I don't think any of them have been unhappy."

"I can't believe that I would ever be a part of your life."

"I am no more part of the life here than you are. The Interpreter is born, not made by the longings of his parents, and he comes no more often than—" he searched her mind for the parallel "—the true genius on your planet. Man or woman, he gives up private life."

"Your laws are cruel."

"Only as cruel or weak as the people who live by them. Do I seem that way to you?" he asked.

She never really knew the shapes of their souls nor the range of their emotions, and only had rare glimpses of the mines and orchards, weavers and goldbeaters, that produced what she used and ate. Sometimes she thought she had glimpses of city spires beyond the forests, and though she knew that the Colonies often shifted with the seasons, there was no change as long as she was with them, and she never found out what they traded for with couns or feathers, or if they sacrificed the living on stone altars, nor the names of their strange gods.

She woke late one morning after a restless night; she was queasy and aching, and was struck with the sudden fear that she was going to have a child. She made some breakfast, and when Kolanddro came in and stood silently looking at her, her teeth began to chatter. He only smiled, and loosening a strand of her hair laid it across his green-white palm, where it lay very black, as though he were matching samples of material.

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"I can't go through with this," she whispered.

He said gravely, "You mustn't think that way. You've accepted our conditions . . . I have had to accept them." But she turned away. What had he had to give up?

Late afternoon when the sun was falling toward the west, a woman dropped down from the sky. She did not come directly into the encampment where the people had gathered around the cooking fires, but folded her wings and waited at the edge of the clearing, searching in the shifting colored frieze her people made out of their most common and ordinary actions.

Finally Kolanddro noticed her and moved forward; Lela turned from her task to watch them as they spoke, soundless shadows in a green shade. Something in their attitudes made her very still, though her halting command of the language would not have allowed her to understand them even if she had heard their voices. The Nevid woman pointed toward the west; her downy hands flickered and her head lifted urgently against his calm attitude; at last they stood still and faced each other without speaking.

Then she turned away and came into the clearing where there was a late gold patch of sunlight lingering; she stopped and stood with her head bent down, almost as though to thrust it under her wing. Soundless and motionless she waited for the desire for flight to thicken her wings with blood. When the great delicate membranes opened finally, she rose against the sun in a blaze of heraldic red, diminished and was gone. But Lela soared with her in imagination over thickets and rolling hills, perhaps past stone towers and shimmering rivers, half blinded by the deep light that warmed the clear air, and without pleasure in the flight.

A voice murumured in her ear that the meat was scorching, and she felt both foolish and sick: she recognized Kolanddro's sacrifice to the laws of Nev. When she looked again, she saw that he was gone. He came out of the pavilion a few minutes later; he was wearing an obsidian dagger.

It was not until after supper that she saw the stranger emerge along the forest trail from the same direction the woman had come. He was a crested and feathered man as splendid of his type as Kolanddro; Kolanddro washed

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his face and hands in a basin and then went out to meet him. They stood facing each other for a moment in a pantomime of tense hieratic gesture she might have imagined among the Egyptians. Kolanddro spoke, unfastening his belt with the dagger and laying it on the ground. He moved his hands in a wide gesture as if to erase whatever angers were between them, and they turned and separated.

Lela sat waiting for him in the pavilion. The sun had almost set and the evening air had thickened to a sweet dusk heavy with the smells of flowers and fruit; indoors was the heart of a rose. The simple dress the Nevids had made for her slid over her body into thick folds out of a Renaissance artist's sketch-book. In the sky there was a liquid atmosphere of mauve and pearl flowing with the last of the sun.

Kolanddro came in, his mind so full of his own affairs he could not have known what was in hers. "That was a long journey for nothing," he said.

She said, "I think he'll make it again one day. I'm going back."

He stood and stared at her. She went on falteringly, "I know it will give you immeasurable trouble to put things right—but they will be right . . . I thought I could be a moral person merely by accepting the inevitable; now I no longer believe it is inevitable. I can't stay here any longer. I must return."

"If you leave here we can't take you back—you understand that?"

"I understand—the kind of law that allows you to risk death fighting a rival even when you're the most important member of a community."

He said simply, "A superman on your world would have to live by the same laws as the rest."

"I agree, and I don't think your laws are unjust, or even inflexible—but they aren't sensitive." The word conjured James very clearly before her, with his capacities for loneliness and self-laceration, and suddenly time, even a lifetime, seemed very short. "They've gotten stunted somewhere along the way, and on Earth they're always reaching, like a tree, for the ultimate justice. Not in lawcourts only, but in relations between persons. The structure gets terribly complicated and top-heavy, but it's a growing one."

"If people on Earth are much like you I think they

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make themselves extremely miserable over nothing."

"That's true enough, too. Will you let me go?"

"No-one may ever find you out there."

"I have enough food to last a while, and there's the water."

"My son?"

"I think you'll have other sons," she said pleadingly. "I can't stay."

"What can you and your husband make of him on Earth?"

She winced. "Perhaps someone who could love both Earth and Nev."

"No, he won't know anything of Nev." He kept his grave regard on her, and she waited. Finally he said: "When everything is quiet, I'll take you back to the boat. I'll break the law, for you, and not tell the others."

When the night was dark and quiet I took off the dress the Nevids had made for me and put on the one I came in. Render unto Caesar. *We went down along the smooth grass, and the colors shimmered on him even in the dark. All I could think of, feeling so foolish and sick, was that he was going to kill that splendidly feathered man, or be killed, and I couldn't say anything, because I'd already told him what I thought of his laws.*

"But we don't fight to the death," he said suddenly.

"Thank you."

"Our law would never allow anyone to leave as cold and unprotected as you are doing. I must bring you food and clothing."

"I don't want them, I think they'd make me feel worse." But there was one thing I wanted from him. I knew he guessed it, but I spoke it aloud anyway.

"Kolanddro. Don't make me forget Nev."

I found my canvas bag. It was weatherproof, but the shoes were rotted from nights of dew and days of hot sun.

He put the pipe to his mouth, and I had one glance of his fingers glittering on the stops, and then the stones

cut her feet. She stood there on the sharp edges, like the transformed mermaid who walked on knives of pain as long as she had legs. She thought she could hear a last thin echo of the pipe, but it faded into the hollow lapping of the waters on the shore under the night wind.

There was no clear memory of how long she waited on the shore, days and nights. She ate concentrates when hunger became painful, and drank

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water when her tongue rattled in her throat, and nightmares chattered around her. She wondered that the baby lived, but it clung fiercely to the fetal stalk and thrived, walled away from her terrors. She could hardly move when a loud bleep sounded in the boat, at last, and she crawled into the terrible place on hands and knees to pick away at the wreckage and find the source, and push the switch that told them she was there. When the rescue ship lifted, she was in a bunk tossing with fever; she never saw the face of the planet.

"Lela."

She was fastened in one clench of force. "Please call the nurse now, James," she whispered. He pressed the buzzer.

"You came back, even when you could have died out there—"

"James, I could fall downstairs on my head any time, or pull a hangnail and get septicemia; it's a chance. But I don't care now. I just want to die."

"Don't talk like that! I want you to live and be happy. With me, whatever happens! I love you, Lela . . ."

But the mist was rising before her eyes, red as the blood in the wings of the Nev woman against the sun.

She opened her eyes once out of the chaos of pain and sound; a rubbergloved hand was holding a shining thing by the heels, a baby gleaming with the last detritus of amniotic fluid. She sank back again.

He was a complete and perfect replica of James, down to the last neat lock of dark hair on his forehead. A stranger in the world, he lay beside her; his arms and legs trembled, his face crumpled, his pink hands moved aimlessly with unconscious grace.

"I can't understand it," said James, ". . . but he is beautiful. Lela, I have to tell you this now; I thought I could get away with it, but I can't. I knew I was sterile before we were married."

"I guessed it," she said. "That was really why I went away. I was going to leave you. But it doesn't matter now."

"But you did come back."

"Yes. I didn't expect much." The months gone, the long slow growth of a child in her: the woman's right she had wanted so deeply—eclipsed in bitterness and recrimination. She smiled without joy. "The tie that binds."

But he said quietly, without

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arrogance, "No. This depends on us."

She bent to smell the newness of the child's flesh, and to feel the hands on her face. "All right, James."

The white sun of Axtu was very clear and warm in the room. She moved her clean drained body under the sheets, grateful enough to have her breasts ripening with milk, the baby in her arm, and James beside her with the faint pulsing of hope between them. **THE END**

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THE LAST HERO

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

He was a man who lived in two worlds, fascinated by one, haunted by the other.

LARAMIE never ceased to marvel at his aim. It seemed he *couldn't* miss. The burnished six-shooter in his capable brown hand spat bullet after bullet, and with each recoil a rustler tumbled from the saddle and became a mound of dusty denims on the hillside.

He could hear Ellen's excited breathing just behind him. He could almost feel her small hand pressing softly on his shoulder. He stole a glance at her, between rustlers, and her fair loveliness made him wince with ecstatic pain. As always, she was smiling at him courageously; as always, her liquid eyes were filled with love and admiration. Her hair was an aureate handful of sunlight, a symbol, in its brightness and purity, of the West he had come to love.

Another rustler bit the dust, then his pistol hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. Quickly, Laramie exchanged the gun for the one Ellen had reloaded, and again the rustlers felt the fury of his lead. But there were so many of them, riding over the vast plain and up the rocky hill, that he knew he couldn't hold them off forever, that sooner or later some of them would reach the outcropping behind which he and Ellen had taken shelter after the horse they were riding double had collapsed beneath them. And then—

Laramie shuddered — not from fear of death, but from fear of the fate worse than death that would befall Ellen

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if the rustlers captured them. No, he could never let that happen. Never. He reached up and patted her hand, trying to reassure her.

She sensed his thoughts. "Promise me you'll never let them take me alive," she said.

He evaded her noble request. "Don't give up yet, gal," he drawled. "As long as my ammo lasts, they'll never take us!"

But would it last? he asked himself, knocking three more rustlers from their saddles. And even if it did last, could he continue to hold the rustlers off till the posse arrived? As though in answer, his gun jammed, and with a groan of despair he grabbed the one Ellen had just finished reloading. He emptied it deliberately, and six more riders threw up their arms and toppled from their mounts. Their companions, however, seemed to divine that something was wrong, and, emitting a series of triumphant yowls, they came thundering up the hillside, lust and lechery shining in their eyes.

Laramie reloaded furiously, but haste made his fingers clumsy, and the chamber jammed. The dust of the approaching horsemen hovered over the hilltop like a malevolent cloud now, and the ground reverberated with the pounding of hooves.

Suddenly Ellen threw her arms around his neck and smothered his lips with a passionate farewell kiss. The kiss gave him the incentive he needed, and he stood up, exposing himself to the fusillade of enemy fire, and flung the gun straight into the face of the leading rustler. The fellow dropped from his saddle, and the horse next in line tripped over him, throwing its rider. A sort of *deus ex machina* chain-reaction ensued, horse after horse stumbling, rider after rider hitting the ground. But the dismounted rustlers were undaunted and they resumed their charge on foot.

Laramie thrust Ellen behind him, shielding her body with his own. Bullets whined all around him. One nicked his earlobe, another lodged in the flesh of his shoulder. Presently the rustlers were upon him and he was swinging savagely with his fists, hearing the crunch of smashed cheekbones and fractured jaws and broken teeth. But he was hopelessly outnumbered and he felt himself being driven back, inch by inch, to the cliff that comprised the other side of the hill.

He was about to give up

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hope, about to seize Ellen and leap with her to their deaths on the jagged rocks below, when he heard the thunder of hooves resounding over the plain and the staccato blasts of friendly six-shooters reverberating in the summer air. The rustlers heard, too, and they threw up their hands and cowered in a straggling line along the edge of the cliff as the posse, red handkerchiefs fluttering, *chaparajos* flapping, sombreros swinging triumphantly in sun-browned hands, breasted the hilltop.

Laramie was surprised—and a little apprehensive—when he saw Ellen's father dismount from a hard-breathing palomino and come walking toward them. He had not thought the white-haired old codger physically up to the rigors of riding with a posse, and his heart pounded in admiration for the Grand Old Man.

"You've saved our ranches, Laramie," the Grand Old Man said, as Ellen embraced him, "and you've saved my daughter from a fate worse than death. Never can it be said that I am unmindful of favors, or reluctant to reward those who perform them. Let bygones be bygones, my son. My daughter is yours and tomorrow you take over as foreman of the Bar-B-Q. I have spoken."

Ellen ran into Laramie's arms and he rejoiced in her warm, virginal loveliness. He bent and kissed her in the red radiance of the setting sun, the two of them silhouetted against the majestic backdrop of the rolling plain and the polychromatic sky—

Laramie could never understand why he invariably chose that particular moment to take off for town and go to a movie. It was a sort of conditioned reflex, he supposed; a re-occurring compulsion that was as much a part of his life as the open trail, the roundup, and beans and bacon cooked over a campfire in the light of the Western stars.

The theatre was the same—huge, empty, the projection booth suspended from the ceiling, the remnants of its broken ladder dangling tantalizingly thirty feet above the floor. Laramie remembered all the times he'd tried futilely to gain access to that lofty, all-important chamber so that he could deactivate the automatic projector, or at least insert a different film. He was sick of the same old movie, day after day after day. He knew the plot by heart and he loathed every

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second of the action. But still he kept coming, again and again and again . . .

He walked up the aisle, still savoring Ellen's kisses. An empty popcorn dispenser iridesced in a corner of the foyer and an equally empty candy machine stood forlornly by the door. The theatre proper was drafty and cold. The huge screen was lit up, a panorama of muted chiaroscuro, and the movie was just beginning. Reluctantly, Laramie identified with the only character—

A creature named Smith.

Smith walked down the littered street, carrying his club, glancing watchfully from side to side, listening, always listening. There was an occasional scurrying sound in the shadows, the sporadic howling of a distant dog-pack. Stars showed above a ragged skyline of brooding buildings, glittered now and then on the panes of a still-intact window. The November wind sent dead leaves rattling over broken walks and ruptured macadam, round the rusted hulks of cars. Smith shivered.

When he came to the corner with the S-bent lamppost, he turned. Lord, he was hungry! He was always hungry—hungry and cold and miserable. And he wanted a woman, and in this twilight world there were no women, nor men either, for that matter—except himself.

But there was food. The rats and the dogs had eaten up everything they could find, but canned food had proved to be beyond their ken. When he reached the supermarket, Smith stepped through the shattered display window and picked his way through the dark aisles. He knew from long familiarity the location of each item, and he chose beans and pears and beer. Then he crouched in a corner, still watching, still listening. He ate the beans by impaling them on his pocket knife. He used his fingers for the pears, scooping the dripping halves out of the can and shoving them into his mouth, tilting the can afterwards and draining the juice. When he finished, he gulped down the beer.

He hadn't intended to fall asleep, but the food and the alcohol, and the heavy tiredness that was always with him, combined, and he slumped down in the corner, still gripping his club. He thought evanescently of Ellen and the ranch and he wished desperately that the movie would end so that he could get back to being Laramie. If he had

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his way, he'd be Laramie all the time; but the movie kept intruding itself and he had to be Smith, whether he wanted to or not, till it had run its daily course. And it was a waste of time to try to return to the ranch ahead of time. He'd tried that once, but the action had only integrated itself into the plot and the movie had run its course anyway. The answer to his dilemma, of course, lay in the projection booth. If he could only gain access to it, he could turn the movie off and be rid of Smith forever. Off . . . or on? For a moment he felt dizzy. If he turned it off, would he cease to be Smith, or would he cease to be Laramie? He pressed his hands against his temples. Slowly, sanity returned. Why, he'd cease to be Smith, of course! Smith was the fictitious character, Laramie, the real one. What was the matter with him anyway? Presently his head bent forward till his forehead rested on his knees. His eyes closed—

The yelping of dogs awakened him. There were four of them in the dawn-gray street, sniffing the sidewalk that fronted the supermarket. They had his spoor, and he knew from past experience that it would be useless to try to outwit them. He stood up stiffly, raised his club. Terror numbed him as the first dog leaped through the broken window, then he reminded himself that this was, after all, only a movie, and that no real harm could befall him, and he caught the dog—a huge collie—squarely on the top of its head with his club. It dropped at his feet and in an instant the rest of the pack was upon it, tearing it to pieces, bolting its flesh, and Smith was running up the aisle to the street and then down the street to his apartment house.

Inside his apartment, he closed and locked the door. It was one of the few apartments in the building that was still habitable. He wondered briefly who had lived in it before, but he did not really care, and presently his thoughts drifted back to his own past. Flashback! he thought deliberately, as the memories of his wife and son straggled through his mind, and he wiped the memories away.

He lay down on the bed and dropped into a fitful sleep. But not for long. There was something he had to do, something even more vital to his continued existence than food.

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He arose, picked up his club, and descended to the street. The sky hung over the city like unwashed laundry. The wind was raw and whispered "winter." He slouched down the street, turned down a broad avenue. When he came to the half-demolished brick building, he turned up the walk. Towers, like steel, leafless trees, stood immobile in the gray afternoon light, some of them bent, some broken, a few still intact.

Inside, he descended to the subterranean control room. He checked the bank of dials and gauges, listened critically to the steady humming of the big generator. He made the few adjustments that were necessary, then he lay down on the battered couch and tried to sleep. Sleeping made the movie slip by faster, and besides, he was tired, he was always tired . . . Half-awake, half-asleep, he half-dreamed of all the shifts he had once put in, in this very room, of the shift in particular, when he had crouched behind the thick foundation wall and listened, terrified, to the sound and fury of Armageddon. Flashback! he thought again, and turned angrily on his side . . .

The windows were dirty with dusk when he awoke. He got up, checked the control panel once more, and left the building. He started walking. Dogs were barking in the distance and leaves rustled beneath his feet. He stopped in the supermarket for supper, then returned to the street. He walked along, whistling, "Home on the Range." Night had fallen, and the ragged sequence of lights supplied by the last generator straggled like incoherent morse code towards the last theatre.

His footsteps quickened. He no longer felt the cold, nor the loneliness, nor the fear. The marquee was an oasis of reassuring brightness, of twinkling, multicolored lights that spelled out *The Man With The Golden Gun.* He entered the foyer, hurried down the aisle between the rows of empty seats to the place where he always sat. The wide, rectangular screen was already flushed with technicolored reality. There were plains and mountains and rivers; valleys, hills, trees—

Laramie reined his horse on the lip of the valley. He shifted to a more comfortable position in the saddle, tilted his sombrero so that it shaded his keen gray eyes. There was a ranchhouse in the valley, and the green land for miles

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around was stippled with grazing cattle. In the distance a small town showed, and Laramie visualized swinging doors and gun fights, and beautiful women waiting to be fought for.

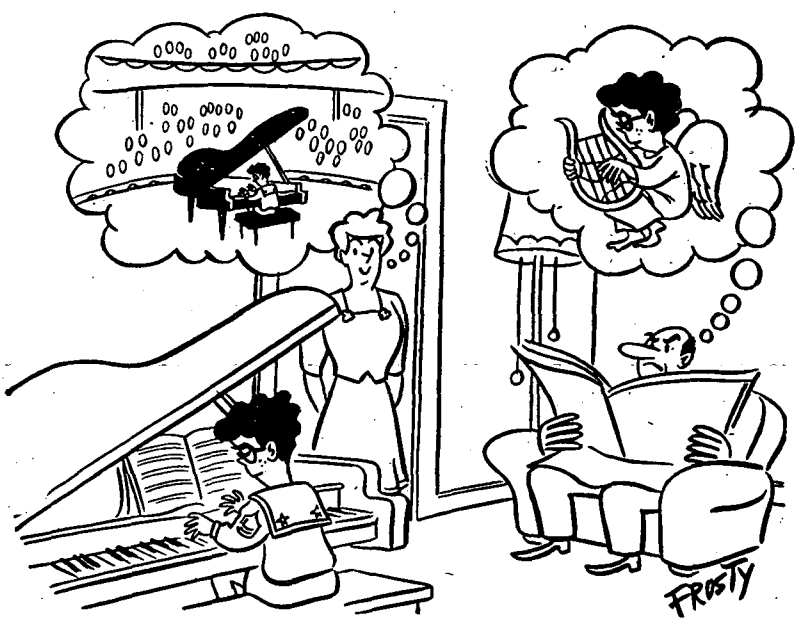
He spurred his horse gently, nosed it down the green hillside. He could almost smell the adventure and the romance and the happiness that would soon be his. And he promised himself that this time, when he took Ellen in his arms, he would *not* forsake her for a horror picture about the sole survivor of World War III.

But he knew he would. After an hour and a half, the reality of the western plains had an inexorable tendency to turn into the fantasy of the bombed-out city. Once, a long time ago it seemed now, things had been the other way around: the city had been the reality, the plains, the fantasy.

But if you were the last man in the world, you had to have something to live for, even if it meant sacrificing your sanity—

Besides, who was there around to call you crazy?

THE END



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The ship carried pure horror. But the terror really started only when the undefiled ones came from Earth. Why would they want a favor from . . .

THE ABNORMALS

By HARLAN ELLISON

BEDZYK saw Riila go mad, and watched her throw herself against the lucite port, till her pin-head was a red blotch of pulped flesh and blood. He sighed, and sucked deeply at his massive bellows chest, and wondered how *he,* of all the Discards, had been silently nominated the leader. The ship hung in space, between the Moon and Earth, unwanted, unnoticed, a raft adrift in the sea of night.

Around him in the ship's salon, the others watched Riila killing herself, and when her body fell to the rug, they turned away, allowing Bedzyk his choice of who was to dispose of her. He chose John Smith—the one with feathers where hair should have been —and the nameless one who chittered instead of talking.

The two of them lifted her heavy body, with its tiny pea of head, and carried it to the garbage port. They emptied it, opened it, tossed her inside, re-dogged and blew her out. She floated past the salon window on her way out. In a moment she was lost.

Bedzyk sat down in a deep chair and drew breath whistlingly into his mighty chest. It was a chore, being leader of these people.

People? No, that was certainly not the word. These Discards. That was a fine willowy word to use. They were scrap, refuse, waste, garbage themselves. How fitting for Riila to have gone that way, out the garbage port. They would *all* bid goodbye that way some day. He noted there

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was no "day" on the ship. But some good *something*—maybe day, maybe night — each of them would go sucking out that port like the garbage.

It had to be that way. They were the Discards.

But people? No, they were not people. People did not have hooks where hands should have been, nor one eye, nor carapaces, nor humps on chests and back, nor fins, nor any of the other mutations these residents of the ship sported. People were normal. Evenly matched sets of arms and legs and eyes. Evenly matched husbands wives. Evenly distributed throughout the Solar System, and evenly dividing the goods of the System between themselves and the frontier worlds at the Edge. And all evenly disposed to let the Dirty Discards die in their prison ship.

"She's gone."

He had pursed his lips, had sunk his perfectly normal head onto his gigantic chest, and had been thinking. Now he looked up at the speaker. It was John Smith, with feathers where hair should have been.

"I said: she's gone."

Bedzyk nodded without replying. Riila had been just one more in the tradition. They had already lost over two hundred Discards from the ship. There would be more.

Strange how these—he hesitated again to use the word *people,* finally settled on the they used among themselves: creatures — these *creatures* had steeled themselves to the death of one of their kind. Or perhaps they did not consider the rest as malformed as themselves. Each person on the ship was different. No two had been affected by Sickness in the same way. The very fibers of the muscle had altered with some of these creatures, making their limbs useless; on others the pores had clogged on their skin surfaces, eliminating all hair. On still others strange juices had been secreted in the blood stream, causing weird growths to erupt where smoothness had been. But perhaps each one thought he was less hideous than the others. It was conceivable. Bedzyk knew his great chest was not nearly as unpleasant to look upon as, say, Samswope's spiny crest and twin heads. *In fact,* Bedzyk mused wryly, *many people might think it was becoming, this great wedge of a chest, all matted with dark hair and heroic-seeming. Uh-huh, the others were pretty miserable to look*

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at, but not myself, especially. Yes, it was conceivable.

In any case, they paid no attention now, if one of their group took his life. They turned away; most of them were better off dead, anyhow.

Then he caught himself.

He was starting to get like the rest of them! He had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't right. No one should be allowed to take death like that. He resolved, the next one would be stopped, and he would deliver them a stern warning, and tell the Discards that they would find landfall soon, and to buck up.

But he knew he would sit and watch the next time, as he had this time. For he had made the same resolve before Riila had gone.

Samswope came into the salon—he had been on KP all "day" and both his heads were dripping with sweat — and picked his way among the conversing groups of Discards to the seat beside Bedzyk.

"Mmm." It was a greeting; he was identifying his arrival.

"Hi, Sam. How was it?"

"Metsoo-metz," he gibed, imitating Scalomina (the one-eyed ex-plumber, of Sicilian descent), tipping his hand in an obvious Scalomina gesture. "I'll live. Unfortunately," he added the last word with only a little drop of humor.

Morbidity ran knee-deep on the ship.

"Riila killed herself a little bit ago," Bedzyk said carelessly. There was no other way to say it.

"I figured as much," Samswope explained. "I saw them carrying her past the galley to the garbage lock. That's number six this week alone. You going to do anything, Bed?"

Bedzyk twisted abruptly in his chair. He leveled a gaze at a spot directly between Samswope's two heads. His words were bitter with helplessness and anger that the burden should be placed upon him. "What do you mean, what am *I* going to do? I'm a prisoner here, too. When they had the big roundup, I got snatched away from a wife and three kids, the same as you got pulled away from your used car lot. What the hell do you want me to do? Beg them not to bash their heads against the lucite, it'll smear our nice North view of space!"

Samswope wiped both hands across his faces simultaneously in a weary pattern. The blue eyes of his left head closed, and the brown eyes of his right head blinked quickly. His left head, which had been speaking till now, nodded onto

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his chest. His right head, the nearly-dumb one, mumbled incoherently — Samswope's left head jerked up, and a look of disgust and hatred clouded his eyes. "Shut up, you—you dullard!" He cracked his right head with a full fist.

Bedzyk watched without pity. The first time he had seen Samswope flail himself—would flagellate be a better term?—he had pitied the mutant. But it was a constant thing now, the way Samswope took his agony out on the dumb head. And there were times Bedzyk thought Samswope was better off than most. At least he had a release valve, an object of hate.

"Take it easy, Sam. Nothing's going to help us, not a single, lousy th—"

Samswope snapped a look at Bedzyk, then catalogued the thick arms and huge chest of the man, and wearily murmured: "Oh, I don't know, Bedzyk, I don't know." He dropped his left head into his hands. The right one winked imbecilically at Bedzyk. Bedzyk shuddered and looked away.

"If only we could have made that landing on Venus," Samswope intoned from the depths of his hands. "If only they'd let us in."

"You ought to know by now, Sam," Bedzyk reminded him bitterly, "there's no room for us in the System at all. No room on Earth and nowhere else. They've got allocations and quotas and assignments. So many to Io, so many to Callisto, so many to Luna and Venus and Mars and anyplace else you might want to settle down. No room for Discards. No room in space, at all."

Across the salon three fish-men, their heads encased in bubbling clear helmets, had gotten into a squabble, and two of them were trying to open the petcock on the third's helmet. This was something else again; the third fish-man was struggling, he didn't want to die gasping. This was not a suicide, but a murder, if they let it go unchecked.

Bedzyk leaped to his feet and hurled himself at the two attacking fish-men. He caught one by the bicep and spun him. His fist was half-cocked, before he realized one solid blow would shatter the water-globe surrounding the fish-face, and killing the mutant. Instead, he took him around and shoved him solidly by the back of the shoulders, toward the compartment door. The fish-man stumbled away, breathing bubbly imprecations into his life water, cast-

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ing furious glances back at his companions. The second fishman came away of his own accord, and followed the first from the salon.

Bedzyk helped the last fishman to a relaxer, and watched disinterestedly as the mutant let a fresh supply of air bubble into the circulating water in the globe. The fish-men mouthed a lipless thanks, and Bedzyk passed it away without affectation. He went back to his seat.

Samswope was massaging the dumb head. "Those three'll never grow up."

Bedzyk fell into the chair. "You wouldn't be too happy living inside a goldfish bowl yourself, Swope."

Samswope stopped massaging the wrinkled yellow skin of the dumb head, seemed prepared to snap a retort, but a blip and clear-squawk from the intercom stopped him.

"Bedzyk! Bedzyk, you down there?" it was the voice of Harmony Teat up in the drive room. Why was it they always called *him?* Why did they persist in making him their arbiter?

"Yeah, I'm here, in the salon. What's up?"

The squawk-box blipped again and Harmony Teat's mellow voice came to him from the ceiling. "I just registered a ship coming in on us, off about three-thirty. I checked through the ephemeris and the shipping schedules. Nothing supposed to be out there. What should I do? You think it's a customs ship from Earth?"

Bedzyk heaved himself to his feet. He sighed. "No, I don't think it's a customs ship. They threw us out, but I doubt if they have the imagination or gall to extract tithe from us for being here. I don't know what it might be, Harmony. Hold everything and record any signals they send. I'm on my way upship."

He stood quickly out of the salon, and up the cross-leveled ramps toward the drive room. Not till he had passed the hydroponics level did he realize Samswope was behind him. "I, uh, thought I'd come along, Bed," Samswope said apologetically, wringing his small, red hands. "I didn't want to stay down there with those—those freaks." His dumb head hung off to one side, sleeping fitfully.

Bedzyk did not answer. He turned on his heel and casually strode updecks, not looking back.

There was no trouble. The ship identified itself when it was well away. It was an At-

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taché Carrier from System Central in Butte, Montana, Earth. The supercargo was a SpecAttaché named Curran. When the ship pulled alongside the Discard vessel and jockeyed for grappling position, Harmony Teat (her long gray-green hair reaching down past the spiked projections on her spinal column) threw on the *attract* field on that portion of the hull. The Earth ship clunked against the Discard vessel, and the locks were synched in.

Curran came across without a suit.

He was a slim, incredibly tanned young man with a crewcut clipped so short a patch of nearly-bald showed at the center of his scalp. His eyes were alert, and his manner was the brisk, friendly manner of the professional dignitary in the Foreign Service.

Bedzyk did not bother with amenities.

"What do you want?"

"Who may I be addressing, sir, if I may ask?" Curran was the perfect model of diplomacy.

"Bedzyk is what I was called on Earth." Cool, disdainful, I-may-be-hideous-but-I-still-have-a-little-pride.

"My name is Curran, Mr. Curran, Mr. Bedzyk. Alan Curran of the System Central. I've been asked to come out and speak to you about—"

Bedzyk settled against the bulkhead opposite the lock, not even offering an invitation to the Attaché to return to the salon.

"You want us to get out of your sky, is that it? You stinking, lousy . . ." he faltered in fury. He could not finish the sentence, so steeped in anger was he. "You set off too many bombs down there, and eventually some of us with something in our bloodstreams react to it, and we turn into monsters. What do you do . . . you call it the Sickness and you pack us up whether we want to go or not, and you shove us into space."

"Mr. Bedzyk, I—"

"You *what?* You damned well *what,* Mr. System Central? With your straight, clean body and your nice home on Earth, and your allocations of how many people live where to keep the balance of culture just so! You *what?* You want to invite us to leave? Okay, we'll go," he was nearly screeching, his face crimson with emotion, his big hands knotted at his sides in fear he would strike this emissary.

"We'll get out of your sky. We've been all the way out to

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the Edge, Mr. Curran, and there's no room in space for us anywhere. They won't let us land even on the frontier worlds where we can pay our way. Oh no, contamination, they think. Okay, don't shove, Curran, we'll be going."

He started to turn away, was nearly down the passageway, when Curran's solid voice stopped him: "Bedzyk!"

The wedge-chested man turned. Curran was unsticking the seam that sealed his jumper top. He pulled it open and revealed his chest.

It was covered with leprous green and brown sores. His face was a blasted thing, then. He was a man with Sickness, who wanted to know how he had acquired it—how he could be rid of it. On the ship, they called Curran's particular deformity "the runnies."

Bedzyk walked back slowly, his eyes never leaving Curran's face. "They sent you to talk to us?" Bedzyk asked, wondering.

Curran re-sealed the jumper, and nodded. He laid a hand on his chest, as though wishing to be certain the sores would not run off and leave him. A terror swam brightly in his young eyes.

"It's getting worse down there, Bedzyk," he said as if in a terrible need for hurrying. "There are more and more changing every day. I've never seen anything like it—"

He hesitated, shuddered.

He ran a hand over his face, and swayed slightly, as though whatever memory he now clutched to himself was about to make him faint. "I—I'd like to sit down."

Bedzyk took him under the elbow, and led him a few steps toward the salon. Then Dresden, the girl with the glass hands—who wore monstrous cotton-filled gloves—came out from the connecting passage leading to the salon, and Bedzyk thought of the hundred weird forms Curran would have to face. In his condition, that would be bad. He turned the other way, and led Curran back up to the drive room. Bedzyk waved at a control chair. "Have a seat."

Curran looked collegiate-boy shook-up. He sank into the chair, again touching his chest in disbelief. "I've been like this for over two months . . . they haven't found out yet; I've tried to keep myself from showing it. . ."

He was shivering wildly.

Bedzyk perched on the shelf of the plot-tank, and crossed his legs. He folded his arms across his huge chest and looked at Curran. "What do

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they want down there? What do they want from their beloved Discards?" He savored the last word with the taste of alum.

"It's, it's so bad you won't believe it, Bedzyk." He ran a hand through his crewcut, nervously. "We thought we had the Sickness licked. There was every reason to believe the atmosphere spray Terra Pharmaceuticals developed would end it. They sprayed the entire planet, but something they didn't even know was in the spray, and something they only half-suspected in the Sickness combined, and produced a healthier strain.

"That was when it started getting bad. What had been a hit-and-miss thing — with just a few like yourselves, with some weakness in your bloodstreams making you susceptible—became a rule instead of an exception. People started changing while you watched. I—I" he faltered, again shuddered at a memory.

"My, my fiancee," he went on, looking at his attaché case and his hands, "I was eating lunch with her in Rockefeller Plaza's Skytop. We had to be back at work in Butte in twenty minutes, just time to catch a cab, and she—she—*changed* while we were sitting there. Her eyes, they, they—I can't explain it, you can't know what it was like seeing them water and run down her ch-cheeks like that, it was—" his face tightened up as though he were trying to keep himself from going completely insane.

Bedzyk curbed the hysteria sharply. "We have seven people like that on board right now. I know what you mean. And they aren't the worst. Go on, you were saying?"

Such prosaic acceptance of the horror stopped Curran's hysteria sharply. "It got so bad everyone was staying at their homes, no one going out it was so horrible. Then some quack physician out in Cincinnati or somewhere like that, came up with an answer. A serum made from a secretion in the bloodstreams of—of—"

Bedzyk added the last word for him: "Of Discards?"

Curran nodded soberly.

Bedzyk's hard-edged laugh rattled against Curran's thin film of calm. He jerked his eyes to the man sitting on the plot-tank. A furious expression came over him.

"What are you laughing at? We need your help! We need all you people as blood donors."

Bedzyk stopped laughing

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abruptly. "Why not use the changed ones from down there," he jerked a thumb at the big lucite viewport where Earth hung swollen and multicolored. "What's wrong with them—" and he added with malice, "— with you?" Curran twitched as he realized he could so easily be lumped in with the afflicted.

"We're no good. We were changed by this new mutated Sickness. The secretion is different in our blood than it is in yours. You were stricken by the primary Sickness, or virus, or whatever they call it. We have a complicated one. But the way the research has outlined it, the only ones who have what we need, are you Dis—" he caught himself, "—you people who were shipped out before the Sickness altered."

Bedzyk snorted contemptuously. He let a wry, astonished smirk tickle his lips. "You Earthies are fantastic." He shook his head in private amusement.

He slipped off the plot-tank's ledge and turned to the port, talking half to himself, half to a non-existent third person in the drive room. "These Earthies are unbelievable! Can you imagine, can you *picture* it?" Astonishment rang in his disbelief at the proposal. "First they hustle us into a metal prison and shoot us out here to die alone, they don't want any part of us, go away they say. Then when the trouble comes to them too big, they run after us, can you help us please, you dirty, ugly things, help us nice clean Earthies." He spun suddenly, "Get out of here! Get off this ship! We won't help you.

"You have your allotments and your quotas for each world—"

Curran broke in, "Yes, that's it. If the population goes down much more, they've been killing themselves, riots, it's terrible, then the balance will be changed, and our entire System culture will bend and fall and—"

Bedzyk cut him off, finishing what he had been saying, "—yes, you have your dirty little quotas, but you had no room for us. Well, we've got no room for you! Now get the hell off this ship. We don't want to help you!"

Curran leaped to his feet. "You can't send me away like this! You don't speak for all of them aboard. You can't treat a Terran emissary this way—" Bedzyk had him by the jumper, and had propelled him toward the closed companionway door before the At-

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taché knew quite what was happening. He hit the door and rebounded. As he stumbled back toward Bedzyk, the great-chested mutant picked the briefcase from beside the control chair and slammed it into Curran's stomach. "Here! Here's your offer and your lousy demands, and get off this ship! We don't want any part of y—"

The door crashed open, and the Discards were there.

They filled the corridor, as far back as the angle where cross-passages ran off toward the Salon and galley. They shoved and nudged each other to get a view into the drive room; Samswope and Harmony Teat and Dresden were in the front, and from somewhere Samswope had produced an effectively deadly little rasp-pistol. He held it tightly, threateningly, and Bedzyk felt flattered that they had come to his aid.

"You don't need that, Sam —Mr. Curran was just leav—"

Then he realized. The rasp was pointed not at Curran, but at himself.

He stood stock still, one hand still clutching Curran's sleeve, as Curran bellied the briefcase to himself.

"Dresden overheard it all, Mr. Curran," Samswope said in a pathetically ingratiating tone. "*He* wants us to rot on this barge," he gestured at Bedzyk with his free hand as the dumb head nodded certain agreement. "What offer can you make us, can we go home, Mr. Curran . . .?" There was a whimpering and a pleading in Samswope's voice that Bedzyk had only *sensed* before.

He tried to break in, "Are you insane, Swope? Putty, that's all you are! Putty when you see a fake hope that you'll get off this ship! Can't you see they just want to *use* us? Can't you understand that?"

Samswope's face grew livid and he screamed, "Shut up! Just shut up and let Curran talk! We don't want to die on this ship. *You* may like it, you little tin god, but we hate it here! So shut up and let him talk!"

Curran spoke rapidly then: "If you allow us to send a medical detachment up here to use you as blood donors, I have the word of the System Central that you will all be allowed to land on Earth and we'll have a reservation for you so you can live normal lives again—"

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Bedzyk again burst in, trying vainly to speak over the hubbub from

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the corridor. "Can't you see he's lying? They'll use us and then desert us again!"

Samswope growled menacingly, "If you don't shut up I'll kill you, Bedzyk!"

Bedzyk faltered into silence and watched the scene before him. They were melting. They were going to let this rotten turncoat Earthie blind them with false hopes.

"We've worked our allotments around so there is space for you, perhaps in the new green-valleys of South America or on the veldtland in Africa. It will be wonderful, but we need your blood, we need your help."

"Don't trust him! Don't believe him, you can't believe an Earthman!" Bedzyk shouted, stumbling forward to wrest the rasp-pistol from Samswopes' grip.

Samswope fired point-blank. First the rasp of the power spurting from the muzzle of the tiny pistol filled the drive room, and the smell of burning flesh, and Bedzyk's eyes opened wide in pain. He screamed thinly, and staggered back against Curran. Curran stepped aside, and Bedzyk mewed in agony, and crumpled onto the deck. A huge hole had been seared through his huge chest. Huge chest, huge death, and he lay there with his eyes open, barely forming the words "Don't . . . you can't, can't t-trust an Earthmmm . . ." with his bloody lips. The last word formed and stayed forever.

Curran's face had paled out till it was a blotch against the dark blue of his jumper. "Y-y-y . . ."

Samswope moved into the drive room and took Curran by the sleeve, almost where Bedzyk had held it. "You promise us we can land and be allowed to settle someplace on Earth?"

Currant nodded dumbly. Had they asked for Earth in its socket, he would have nodded agreement. Samswope still held the rasp.

"All right, then . . . get your med detachment up here, and get that blood. We want to go home, Mr. Curran, we want to go home more than anything!"

They led him to the lock. Behind him, Curran saw three mutants lifting the blasted body of Bedzyk, bearing it on their shoulders through the crowd. The body was borne out of sight down a cross-corridor, and Curran followed it out of sight with his eyes.

Beside him, Samswope said: "To the garbage lock. We go that way, Mr. Curran."

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His tones were hard and uncompromising. "We don't like going that way, Mr. Curran. We want to go home. You'll see to it, won't you, Mr. Curran?"

Curran nodded dumbly again, and entered the lock linking between ships.

Ten hours later, the med detachment came up. The Discards were completely obedient and tremendously helpful.

It took nearly eleven months to inoculate the entire population of the Earth and the rest of the System—strictly as preventive caution dictated—and during that time no more Discards took their lives. Why should they? They were going home. Soon the tug-ships would come, and help jockey the big Discard vessel into orbit for the run to Earth. They were going home. There was room for them now, even in their condition. Spirits ran high, and laughter tinkled oddly down the passageway in the "evenings." There was even a wedding between Arkay (who was blind and had a bushy tail) and a pretty young thing the others called Daanae, for she could not speak herself. Without a mouth that was impossible. At the ceremony in the salon, Samswope acted as clergy, for the Discards had made him their leader, in the same, silent way they had made Bedzyk the leader before him. Spirits ran high, and the constant knowledge that as soon as they had the Sickness halted, they would be going home.

Then one "afternoon" the ship came.

Not the little tugs, as they had supposed, but a cargo ship nearly as big as their own home. Samswope rushed to synch in the locks, and when the red lights merged on the board, he locked the two together firmly, and scrambled back through the throng to be the first to greet the men who would deliver them.

When the lock sighed open, and they saw the first ten who had been thrust in, they knew the truth.

One had a head flat as a plate, with no eyes, and its mouth in its neck. Another had several hundred thousand slimy tentacles where arms should have been, and waddled on stumps that could never again be legs. Still another was brought in by a pair of huge empty-faced men, in a bowl. The bowl contained a yellow jelly, and swimming in the yellow jelly was the woman.

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Then they knew. They were not going home. As lockful after lockful of more Discards came through, to swell their ranks even more, they knew these were the last of the tainted ones from Earth. The last ones who had been stricken by the Sickness—who had changed before the serum could save them. These were the last, and now the Earth was clean.

Samswope watched them trail in, some dragging themselves on appendageless torsos, others in baskets, still others with one arm growing from a chest, or hair that was blue and molding growing out all over the body. He watched them and knew the man he had killed had been correct. For among the crowd he glimpsed a bare-chested Discard with huge sores on his body. Curran.

And as the cargo ship unlocked and swept back to Earth—with the silent warning *Don't follow us, don't try to land, there's no room for you here* — Samswope could hear Bedzyk's hysterical tones in his head:

Don't trust them! There's no room for us anywhere! Don't trust them!

You can't trust an Earthman!

Samswope started walking toward the galley slowly, knowing he would need someone to seal the garbage lock after him. But it didn't matter who it was. There were more than enough Discards aboard now. **THE END**

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the eye of aesculapius

By STANLEY R. LEE

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Take one manic-depressive navigator, one galactic phenomenon, one psychiatrist, one poker game, and one astrologer; combine to produce a wildly wonderful, strangely touching story by a new writing talent.

SOMETIMES this universe does get monotonous," Pendelton was telling them. "Same old galaxies, same old stars, same old cepheid variables. Know it like the back of my hand. Same old interstices. Listen, you see one interstice you see 'em all."

The captain tossed a black jack on a red queen and pursed his lips, hardly listening. Across the small table Dr. Yarmush was thoughtfully sipping coffee. They were waiting for Third Officer Pendelton to get around to the position report, and from experience the captain had found that eventually the information would be forthcoming, it was all a matter of being patient and understanding. In fact the captain had never been quite so patient and understanding in his whole life, but then he'd never been deep in space before with a manic-depressive navigator on a talking jag. He and Dr. Yarmush waited quietly as Pendel-

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ton rambled on, dabbling in macroscopia, speaking lightly of star systems and nebulas while a strange constellation of his own glittered in his eyes.

"No sir," Pendelton buzzed away, "it's not the most interesting of all possible universes but, like the man says, it's the only one we've got."

The captain tossed a red ten on the assaulting jack and sighed. For the good of the ship he was trying hard to maintain a psycho-Christian attitude. "Honor thy neighbor's neurosis," he kept telling himself. "Trespass not upon his castles in the air . . ."

"You may also be interested to know," Pendelton was saying by way of peroration, "that all is more or less well in the universe. I'd say it's pretty much the same way we left it last time, ignoring of course the red shiftings, starlight tide accretions and a few recent supernovae. And, let's see now—oh yes, I almost forgot, we're on schedule and course."

The captain breathed quietly, not wishing to disturb the delicate equilibrium of silence. He left the table and strolled slowly to the forward port. He was going to have to ask a question, there was no way out of it. He pointed to a speck of light. "You're sure?" he said. "Can you give me a yes or no 100% assurance that this is the one we've come for, Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring? When you consider our intentions, Pendelton, there must be no doubt whatso—" He stopped because a look of rapture had stolen over Pendelton's countenance.

"How odd," the third officer said with intensity, his eyebrows knitting together, his nostrils flaring. "And grand too! The one we've come for, you said, meaning a star. A star!" He wheeled on a graceful pivot and addressed Yarmush. "I find that rather titillating, don't you doctor? I mean, isn't it rather remarkable for a mere man to be able to say something like that? It isn't as though he were using poetic license, which would be bad in a captain. No, by God. He said we've come for a star and he meant it!"

The captain sat down opposite Yarmush and poured himself some coffee.

"Not being a navigator," Pendelton continued, a marked gaiety in his voice, a certain delicate abandon in his limbs, "I imagine one part of the void looks pretty much like any other, Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring could be almost any seventh magnitude star. I realize what this must do to your orientation, adrift in the universe this way. Ah, the universe. Know what Euripides called the universe? 'A song sung by an idiot dancing down the

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wind.' Isn't that marvelous? And we're in the middle of it! However, Euripides to the contrary notwithstanding I assert that the heavenly body we are now approaching is in fact Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring, that various and sundry of my instruments all agree quite closely in this and that, not being a seat of the pants navigator by any stretch of the imagination, I base all my decisions on a majority vote of the instruments."

The captain and Yarmush stared into each other's eyes for a moment.

"Will there be anything else?" Pendelton asked, beaming.

Without looking at Pendelton's glowing face, and not daring to hope for a precise answer, the captain said: "How far off are we?"

"Six hours," Pendelton replied promptly. "I try to be prepared for these little briefings; I realize how utterly dependent you are on numbers. Out in space that's all one really has, isn't it? In space one is, after all, not much more than one's coordinates." He took out a sheetful of figures and placed them on the table between the captain and Yarmush. "We must maintain this course for that number of hours," he said, pointing to the entries. "You don't have to, of course, I'm only suggesting it. Then, if you're in the mood, you can bring her around to such and such a bearing at which point you'll be 45 minutes away from firing time. Three quarters of an hour later you may, if ready and so inclined, fire."

The captain sighed: he had his course on paper. "That'll be all, lieutenant," he said.

There was an unnecessarily sharp click of heels and the navigator was gone.

A bemused silence followed.

"Well, doctor?" the captain said to Yarmush.

"Hmmmmmmmmmmm."

"For three years the most sullen individual in the Space Corps," the captain said, letting off some of his psycho-Christian steam. "Never get a word out of him! Morose in the morning, sulky in the afternoon, surly at night. Now, this time out, instead of his usual plain peevishness, I've got an *elated* third officer on my hands."

"He certainly *seems* happy," Yarmush remarked, idly turning the pages of Pendelton's service folder.

"Happy? He's practically been *tittering* for the last week and a half."

"It's interesting though that you never requested a psychiatric verdict on him while he was *un*happy."

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, all I know is my

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navigator's got the giggles and I don't like it. There's a lot of things about him I don't like, such as this, for instance." The officer pounced on Pendelton's dossier. "Look here. He was along on the first Mars flight. Got appendicitis two hours before touchdown. The first men on the planet Mars spent their first three hours there assisting at an operation. Pendelton himself never left his bunk until three days after they were back in space."

"Appendicitis is appendicitis," Yarmush remarked reasonably.

"And look here," the captain continued, not swayed in the least. "On the third Mars flight—when my navigator finally managed to get outside the ship, at least—he was *left behind* on takeoff. A quarter of a million dollars in fuel was spent going back for him."

"But it says here," Yarmush said, "that it was a crew error. They all thought Pendelton's spare space suit had Pendelton inside it."

"For Pendelton to have forgotten about the takeoff time was an inexcusable blunder."

"But he'd found what he believed to be a *human artifact*. A discovery of such incalculable importance would make anyone forgetful."

"Except that his famous vase was a natural formation. A piece of stone fashioned by natural processes and having the appearance of a man-made implement. If you ask me the whole idea was nature's way of getting rid of a factory defective: I'm talking about Pendelton. But *that* captain decided to waste the taxpayer's money."

"I saw that vase in the museum," Yarmush said. "It does look astoundingly like a vase."

"If you are seriously going to try and rationalize *that* career away," the captain replied, "you'll not have time for much else on this voyage. On page 40 you'll find that he had Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever on the first Venus flight."

The captain turned away and became intensely busy. He did not really enjoy talking about the third officer.

Yarmush slowly closed the dossier and rested his arms on it.

"Then what's he got to be so happy about?" he mused.

Effervescing quietly, Pendelton leaned on the catwalk railing and gazed out through carbonated eyes at the activity around him.

"Amazing," he said to Second Officer Spencer. "What will man think of next?"

The huge torpedo inched past them, suspended on chains from a ceiling trolley, gently swaying high over the heads of the crew

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members below. "Here I've been thinking all along that everything worth while has already been invented," Pendelton said, "and they come up with this thing, a clever little gadget for which the word 'nuclear' would be a mild euphemistic description. Poor Cassiopeia."

"Yeah, sure, some other time maybe," Spencer said, moving on down the catwalk, following the slow progress of the missile.

"You're worried!" Pendelton said, pointing a long gracefully tapered finger at him. "Don't try to hide it, I can see. Listen, Spencer, nothing will age a man faster than worrying. And why be concerned, you're one of the lucky types, didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't know that," Spencer said distantly.

"You exude success the way other men sweat. My friend, you are what I call a silver spooner, born with a 114 piece set of matched sterling silver utensils spilling out over the operating table. Torn from a womb? Nonsense. You were gently eased out of a cornucopia while your cloven-hooved physician performed on a syrinx. In other, perhaps less scientific times than these, you would be described as having been born under a lucky star."

The second officer looked around at the shining smiling face of the third officer and said nothing. Then he lit a cigarette as the breech of the port firing tube was slammed shut on the first of the two torpedoes.

Pendelton shook his head in admiration.

"Think of all the twitching that's going on inside this hull," he said. "All the coming and going and doing, out here in big zero-space. Can't you just see a great big black puddle of nothingness and-*zip*-we go flipping by stretching all the warps and ejecting *solid concentrated urine* out the back for power? It all goes to disprove, as I see it, what Dostoyevsky said about man. 'Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel.' That's what he said and I question this, Spencer, I seriously do."

The second torpedo floated past them.

"Now we're going to blow up a star," Pendelton said. "Diffuse it over a couple of thousand cubic light years. Star light, star bright, first star I've pulverized tonight. And why? Listen to me Spencer, this is interesting, it bears. After we blow up Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring, Pluto will start spinning in toward the sun on account of it will then have a gently unbalanced set of gravitational forces pushing on it. Twenty five years from now someone'll blast another star into oblivion and old cold Pluto will take up a warm stable orbit

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in close to the sun, in with the habitable planets, the cute green little sociable ones."

Spencer's face congested into a squint as the torpedo, for no apparent reason, began to oscillate in two planes at once.

"Of course this *is* a toying with the divine order, an implication that He hadn't got it quite right the first time, but then who's perfect?"

There was the quick brittle snapping of metal, a remote little sound that seemed to come from nowhere in particular but suddenly one of the chains wasn't there anymore.

The two officers high on the slender catwalk saw one end of the huge torpedos fall in free flight while the other spun at the end of its tether, and when all the individual motions had coalesced into a resultant—the missile was swinging in a ponderous arc headed straight at them. When it hit Pendelton and Spencer were shot away from each other, flying apart as the catwalk under their feet exploded upwards followed by the thrusting torpedo itself. There was a tremendous *clang* as the projectile heaved ceilingward and resonantly destroyed a tank of heavy machine oil fastened there, then swung back through the deluge of oil to the far side of the ship—the outer skin—where it drew a broad black stroke on the paint, coming within an ounce-second of fatiguing the metal, saved perhaps only by its impromptu, self-lubricating oil bath.

The torpedo whisked back and forth across the room, playing itself out.

Second Officer Spencer lifted his face out of a pool of oil and thoroughly disgorged his last two meals, the teetering catwalk swaying dangerously with each convulsion of his stomach. As he slowly and delicately rose to his hands and knees, his ears roaring, his stomach still twitching, the structure beneath him audibly collapsing with each passing second, he heard a voice. The voice, apparently, was talking to him, a matter of fact sing-song voice that didn't seem to be a part of the stomach-wretching oil-spattered world.

"Now my point about Dostoyevsky is this," the voice was saying.

The second officer turned to find Pendelton's eager face a foot away, his kneeling body dripping oil, his eyes incandescent, his smile milk-white framed in lubricant.

"Now don't start worrying," Pendelton interrupted himself. "You're a silver spooner remember and we cancel each other out. As far as results are concerned nothing *serious* has happened.

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But listen, Spencer, doesn't it strike you as being an appealing little gesture of man's to play tiddlywinks with planets in order to make room for his kids?"

The torpedo-pendulum that had almost tossed them into the pit of space whistled slowly back and forth through the dead silent air of the ship.

"Stay right where you are," Spencer ordered weakly. "Don't move an inch, don't even breathe, until I'm on that ladder."

"But all I wanted to say," the navigator replied eagerly, a drop of black oil rolling off his nose, "was that this goes to prove my *point*. My thesis is that man can and does put up with anything —but only for so long. There's a limit. There comes a time when he gets pushed to a point beyond which he has nothing to lose and he becomes aware that he has nothing to lose. Oh, nothing important anyway. That's when he responds, when he moves planets for example, that's when the wild things get done, the wonderful things!"

Spencer disappeared down the ladder.

"The really exquisite things too," Pendelton whispered ecstatically after him.

"I think you're wasting your time doing it this way," Pendelton told Dr. Yarmush.

They were alone in the officer's wardroom. Yarmush was seated at the writing table while the navigator, his features alternating between serenity and enchantment, slowly wandered around the room with hands behind his back.

"Not that I'm trying to tell you your business," Pendelton went on, "but insanity is relative, isn't it? It's a deviation from the mean. And what, I laughingly inquire, is the mean? It's what you say it is. It's a matter of definition, of opinion. In fact it's another one of those things that are determined by the good old democratic process. Now if I were you I'd go visit with the crew and take a vote: Yes or No, Is Pendelton's Clutch Slipping? Be far more efficient than examining me, after all what do *I* have to say about it?"

The psychiatrist imperturbably lit a cigar. "All I asked you for was a chat," he said.

"But you do think I'm mad, don't you? Come on, confess now, you do, don't you? Just a little?"

"Would you really expect me to say so if I thought so?"

Pendelton smirked. "Pretty fast on your feet. I suppose you get that way from habitually dealing with screwballs."

"If you keep insisting that you're nuts I may start believing you," Yarmush warned, noticing at the same time that

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there was a quality of vigilance, of wariness, about Pendelton which he'd seen before but hadn't consciously identified. The navigator, in his apparently casual stroll around the room was *checking* things, sometimes with only a glance, sometimes with a quick movement of his hand.

"Frankly I'm interested in why you're apparently so happy," Yarmush said. "That's a curious thing for a psychiatrist to be concerned with, isn't it?"

"You don't have to apologize," Pendelton answered, climbing up on the dining table. He checked the ceiling light fixture for solidity, then hopped down and tightened the bolts that held the chairs in place during takeoffs. "Go ahead," he said, "it's a long trip, nothing much for you to do, analyze away."

Yarmush watched in silence as Pendelton's eyes wandered ceaselessly over the room looking for things to inspect. "If you don't like it in here we can go somewhere else and talk," he said softly.

Pendelton stopped. "Suit yourself," he replied non-committally.

They strolled toward the control cabin.

"Let me put it this way," Yarmush said. "Do you know why you're happy or do you just . . . feel happy?"

"Nice of you to ask. I'm surprised you didn't immediately conclude Pendelton is riding his way through space perched on top of a manic crest. I mean, with my record, what could I possibly have to be consciously, rationally happy about?"

"You haven't had much in the way of luck," the doctor admitted and then stopped with his hand on the door. "*That's* why you were checking everything back there."

For reply, Pendelton entered the control room and gathered up all loose objects lying around. He stashed them away in a cabinet and locked it. "In a few minutes those torpedoes will be fired," he said. "The ship will jar. If I am standing near anything loose it will fall and hit me on the head."

"I see," Yarmush said slowly. "You believe you're afflicted with bad luck."

"Shall I take out my record and show you?"

"No, no," the doctor said hastily. "Once is enough."

"The important thing to be gleaned from that living record of disaster," Pendelton said, "is that while you can't expect to ever win, to triumph, it is at least possible to earn a draw. Hell, I'm alive!"

"Certainly."

"There's nothing certain about it at all. It's highly uncer-

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tain. You don't think I've survived to the age of 28 playing it by ear, do you? Listen, I do more staff work crossing a busy intersection than all of Supreme Headquarters in Washington, D. C., does in a week. I'm a genius at anticipating catastrophes. Where you sail out across a street with a few seconds thought I create a detailed campaign with sixteen possible alternatives. If a flaming pit opened at my feet I'd be ready for it!"

"I find that a singularly healthy attitude," the psychiatrist said, scratching his neck. "Weird and yet healthy."

"I've survived for more than a quarter of a century," Pendelton said proudly, "every day of which has been a pitched battle against circumstance."

Yarmush began taking notes. "What's your explanation for this?" he said.

"The Eye of Aesculapius."

"The eye of—"

"A-e-s-c-u-l-a-p-i-u-s," Pendelton spelled.

Yarmush smiled sheepishly. "Go on," he said.

"Odd creature that I am," Pendelton began, pacing warily, "I was born under the Eye of Aesculapius, a seventh magnitude star in a non-zodiacal constellation. It is perhaps significant in our respective life lines, doctor, that Aesculapius was the first physician. I first became aware of the Eye at the age of five. It seemed to be a stern Eye then because I didn't have my present planning ability. I was buffeted about, completely in its toils. My toys literally destroyed themselves, my clothing ripped as if by magic, my knees—the achilles heel of a child—were scarred and torn beyond belief by the time I was eight. I might have spent my childhood as the surgical plaything of the young medical student Aesculapius, he of the laughing sadistic Eye."

"But wasn't this a fanciful notion of a young boy? As you grew older didn't you lose this belief?"

"Not at all," Pendelton replied. "My horoscope was my service record in embryo. Astrologists reacted to it as you did, only *before* it happened."

"And it still seems possible to you, with your scientific education, that a distant star can influence the course of your life?"

"Why not? Every object in the universe exerts a gravitational force on every other object. Perhaps my blood ebbs and rips in accordance with the movements of Aesculapius. He flares upwinks, I should say—and the force is communicated to me instantly. What happens? Perhaps my pituitary secrets an extra drop that day. Or other people's

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pituitaries. Anyway, why bother with theories, I'm an empiricist."

There was a sudden jolt as the torpedoes fired.

The empiricist - navigator leaped across the room and sat on the psychiatrist's lap. As the ship rolled, a rack-mounted radar modulator weighing 250 pounds slid from its compartment and thrust out into the room as far as its rollers would permit. It crashed to a stop at exactly where Pendelton's head had been two seconds earlier. Pendelton grinned down at Yarmush and patted him on the shoulder. "Took a guess and figured you were lucky." He stood up and strolled nonchalantly to the port. "The Eye is squinting now," he said, looking out at the dark universe.

Yarmush cleared his throat. "Believe I'll lie down awhile before dinner."

Pendelton spoke in a clinical tone. "Take two aspirins and start calling it coincidence as soon as possible. Be on your feet again in no time."

Beep.

The captain had won 37 dollars at poker. The wardroom intercom was beeping satisfactorily at half-minute intervals, meaning that his two cobalt torpedoes were reaching out for their target but hadn't quite touched it yet. Happily laying down a full house, the captain hauled in an attractive pile of money that had moments before been the property of Dr. Yarmush and Second Officer Spencer.

Beep.

He was joyfully contemplating which procedural step he would take first in order to rid himself of Pendelton when the navigator entered the wardroom, beaming, and announced: "Torpedoes on course, on schedule, deal me in."

Now that the ship was on its homeward course, the captain's psycho-Christian attitude was forgotten. "We're playing poker," he said sarcastically. "For money."

"What else matters?" the third officer replied with an absolutely straight face.

Beep.

"I won 600 dollars off you at blackjack three years ago," the captain said. "You complained about it for weeks. I got the impression you didn't like to lose."

"Not at all," Pendelton said, rubbing his hands in a businesslike manner and picking up the deck. "I said that I didn't object one bit to losing. I only objected to losing *all* the time. There was no element of chance or gambling. I always lost." He cut the cards and then expertly riffled them with a loud clatter. "Deal,"

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he said, grinning, to Yarmush.

Beep.

"You're sure?" the psychiatrist replied. "You feel . . . lucky?"

Trying to force away a smile with clenched lips—so that it turned into a rather obnoxious gloat—Pendelton nodded.

He lost eight hands in a row.

On the ninth hand he didn't even bother to look at his cards: they stayed face down on the table and Pendelton showed no interest in them whatsoever. But when the captain opened for a quarter, Pendelton kicked it a dollar, drawing strange looks from the three men, which he avoided by casually glancing around at the far corners of the room.

"How many?" Yarmush said.

"Two."

"One."

"I'm pat."

They looked at the navigator.

"You can't very well be pat," the captain explained elaborately, "if you haven't looked at your cards."

"Sir," was the reply, accompanied by a very bland expression, "if the captain *orders* me to look at them I will, otherwise—"

"Bet a double sawbuck," the captain replied.

"I'm out," Second Officer Spencer said.

"Bet 83 dollars," Pendelton said. He sat back and folded his arms, then sucked in his cheeks to keep from grinning.

Dr. Yarmush cleared his throat. "I'm out," he said, embracing the better part of valor.

The captain took out his wallet and prepared to do some poker playing.

The betting soared in a crazy manic spiral.

The second officer and Yarmush watched with swiveling heads as the first and third officers alternately tossed larger and larger sums of money onto the table.

The captain signed a check to cover a bet of $777.77 and said grimly: "Call."

Three heads inched towards Pendelton's cards.

"Oh, incidentally," the navigator remarked. "I don't know if you've noticed, but the mission is over. Scratch one star."

They listened for the missing beep tone.

"It stopped right before this hand was dealt out," Pendelton told them. Then he started to laugh.

It was a surprise to hear the navigator laugh. It was an innocent laugh and a sane laugh and it made a happy sound in the wardroom. It even seemed to have an affect on Pendelton's countenance, the glow vanishing as if it had become audible and

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was thereby exorcised. As the three men watched, Pendelton hilariously coasted down from his manic eminence.

Dr. Yarmush slowly got to his feet.

"Oh my *God*," he said.

Pendelton rocked in his chair and pounded the table.

"Listen," Yarmush said, shaking him by the shoulder. "You couldn't have, I don't believe it, you wouldn't *dare*."

Pendelton tried to answer and drooled over his chin.

"The Eye of Aesculapius?" Yarmush asked.

"What's the Eye of Aesculapius got to do with us?" the captain asked, looking from one to the other.

Pendelton stopped laughing for two seconds.

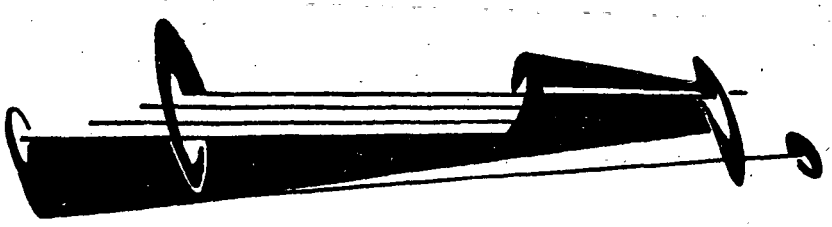
"It's closed," he said, and then was off again, soaring in a special dimension of his own.

"What's he talking about?" the captain said, but the psychiatrist didn't hear him, he was turning over Pendelton's cards, and the only sound in the ward-room was the sound of Pendelton liberated, Pendelton a free agent, Pendelton the lucky, Pendelton the silver spooner, as the cards came up, one after another: ten of spades, jack of spades, queen of spades, king of spades . . .

When they got back to earth the captain instituted court-martial proceedings. But the papers kept getting lost somehow and he had to do it over and over again. After a while he began to see the point. And Pendelton was no longer around to remind him of the incident. He was given a promotion that was intended for a Lieutenant Pederson, along with the command of his own ship. And the truth is that things went pretty much his own way from then on because he was a man without a star.

There wasn't an astrologer in the galaxy who could touch him.

THE END



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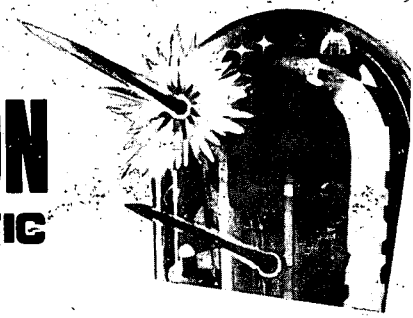

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